NARAMAUKE

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For the fans of the Teen Killers Club series.

Teen Killers Club

Teen Killers in Love

Teen Killers at Large

The Merciless King of Moore High

Planning a hook up is like planning a murder, Erik thought.

Jada had slipped him a note at fire circle without the others noticing, instructing him to meet her in this grove of birches. They were far enough away from camp no one would hear his screams, the ground below soft enough to dig a grave or throw a blanket over, depending. But whatever Jada's intentions were, she was taking her time.

And, sadly, Jada was wearing a pink fringed bucket hat. The brim blocked his view of her face, and Erik relied on mirroring people's emotions, having precious few of his own. The fringe was just insult to injury; he was aesthetically offended.

"You got a girlfriend back home?" Jada asked.

Erik frowned. The last time he'd signed out of Ledrick's clinic, it

had been six months and twelve parties since his parents' funeral; that last one was his thirteenth. He'd spent the first twenty minutes locating the dad's private liquor stash and the rest of the night trying to empty it.

He was three fingers down on an expensive 2015 whisky, in some kind of study, when they cornered him. Two of the most confident (and, not coincidentally, hottest) senior girls from Skye's school, their eyes wide, choking on nervous laughter. The braver one finally explained: neither of them wanted to be alone with him, but both wanted to "try him out" before college, if he was down to hook up with her and her girlfriend at the same time.

"Hell, I'll take on all four of you," he'd joked, though his vision hadn't quite doubled. It was blurry, though, the hall a cloud, and he staggered a little between them as they led him down the hall to a guest bedroom.

After they left, it took him a long time to get dressed. His body kept pitching and shaking until he bolted into the ensuite and vomited a stream of liquid the color of glow sticks. Later he learned this was his stomach bile.

Nausea still washed over Erik whenever he heard the words "drink" or "girlfriend."

"Well?" Jada smiled up from under the brim of her bucket hat and he saw instantaneously what she wanted: for him to *like her*.

A shame.

He could make her *think* he liked her, but eh. He was already maxed out on status at camp since they'd all learned he had the highest kill count the first morning.

"I've never wanted a girlfriend, no," Erik explained.

"What? Are you serious? You've *never* had a girlfriend?" Jada smiled, disbelieving, and he smiled back, annoyed. There was no way the conversation went well from here.

"I prefer to keep my options open."

"Options?" Her nose wrinkled, smile downshifting to a sneer. "I'm the only girl at camp."

Didn't he know it. A face framed in blue hair flickered at the back of his mind. He pushed it away. "Sorry, I thought you wanted to hook

up." Erik shrugged, looking over her head into the woods. "But if you're expecting me to carve our initials into a tree or something, I'd rather just go back to sleep."

"*Wow*," Jada gasped, instantly furious. "Am I *interrupting your sleep?* Fine, we can call it right here. But you can forget about kissing me again, because I don't play games—"

"Me neither." Erik nodded in agreement. "Goodnight."

He was getting nauseous again at the thought. Erik *hated* kissing.

He'd only kissed Jada before because he'd run out of ways to avoid it. Sex was Erik's favorite sport, after climbing, and kissing was sort of like a toll he had to pay to get there. But it was *disgusting.* And girls acted like they owned you afterward.

Jada would be mad, but he could get her back if he wanted. People were so easy to manipulate; they were starting to bore him. All except one. Anger, the one feeling he always had access to, washed over him: Why wasn't the Girl from Hell here?

Erik cut across the field by the obstacle course to climb the fake apartment building, both to give Jada time to get back to the cabins and because the dark made climbing harder and, therefore, more fun. He started up the side of the fake building, mentally running through the case again, as though singing a favorite song.

Rose Rowan had been murdered in a shed deep in the woods in Ledmonton, Oregon, behind the trailer park where the Girl from Hell, Signal Deere, lived; the same park the two girls had grown up in together. But while Rose had moved out of the park and into a nice house by high school, joined a big happy church and found legions of friends, Signal had morphed into an introverted weirdo obsessed with horror movies, her face almost hidden under circles of eyeliner and blue hair.

Rose's parents said the girls had been estranged for years, but Signal had started turning up at the house all the time in the last few months, coming and going at odd hours.

When Signal was found staggering through the woods soaked in Rose's blood, some damning facts came to light: She'd woken up with Rose's decapitated body in her lap, the saw used to do it under Signal's hand. No evidence of any third person entering the shed, and

Signal had no memory of the entire night. And she tested off the charts Class A. It was cut and dried.

But her *mugshot.*

It was the only picture that let you really see her face, most of her eyeliner cried off. Erik, who had spent years mirroring people and knew something about expressions, read only one thing in hers: deeply heartfelt grief.

Emotions took *a lot* of energy to counterfeit. To project that kind of grief while absorbing all the inputs of a police intake? Impossible. Impossible for him, certainly.

Perhaps she was more of a Class A than he was! An Oscar-caliber actress and a total psychopath! That was a girl he wanted to meet.

Or she was innocent.

And if the Girl from Hell was innocent, then anything was possible. Avenging his parents' deaths, ending the Wylie-Stanton, regaining his own legal and personal autonomy—she could make all of that possible, if she was innocent.

But without seeing her in person, he couldn't *know*. He'd gotten a little obsessive, trying to piece her together from the internet, his rational mind in a constant duel with his gut instinct. Descriptions of her were wildly contradicting and there was no video of her talking—he'd never heard her voice. The one good thing about getting shipped off to camp by Ledrick was his certainty she'd be here. But no. Now he couldn't even look her up online. His disappointment was becoming something frantic.

Erik got to the top of the fake apartment building. There was a private residence maybe an hour and a half walk from camp. He'd seen headlights, so it was occupied. Maybe some weak little retirees? Not like it mattered, with a kill switch in his neck. Until he figured out his exit strategy, he was stuck in the woods with a rogue's gallery of absolute cretins.

He knew Ledrick would have them at each other's throats in a couple days, and Ledrick wouldn't have to push hard to get the fighting started. Erik had clocked all the other campers pocketing some kind of weapon, as though they sensed the coming storm as well.

But Erik wasn't worried about his own survival. If things went south before he escaped, he'd take out as many of his fellow bunkmates as required without a second thought. Life, like climbing, was a precious but solitary struggle. Everyone else was just dead weight.

Erik was at the top of the sycamore tree, feet swinging over the arts and crafts table, when the white prison bus flashed through the trees. He stood up on the smooth branch in one easy motion, straining for a better view.

"What is it?" Troy called up.

"New campers," Erik called down. From somewhere Dave could drive to and back from in one day. Like Oregon?

"Better be some new girls," Troy announced to the table.

"Better not. I like having a private cabin, thank you very much," Jada said.

Erik straddled the branch again, staring at the speckled bark between his hands, and started counting down from one hundred. His mother had taught him to do this when he was about to lose his temper. He wasn't losing his temper, but the rising tension in his chest felt similar.

When Erik reached forty-seven, he sensed motion on the path and looked up to see a group of three cresting the hill, edged with amber by the late-afternoon sunlight: Kate, smiling, a tall, masked girl with recent arterial spray all over her prison uniform, and her.

The Girl from Hell.

She was maybe five-foot-four with blue hair now faded pastel. Her face was scrubbed of all make-up, her features unremarkable except for her eyes. They were slightly too large and the grief from her mugshot had settled into them, giving her the unnerving stare of a haunted doll. And when those large dark eyes passed over Erik's tree, he knew immediately.

This girl could never kill anyone.

Erik climbed down from the tree, shaking hard, and landed a few

feet behind her. She was whispering something to the table, then Dennis explained there were no fences or cameras. Troy was leaning back and forth, trying to size her up, teeth slightly bared, but the masked girl blocked him. An arm as long as an NBA player's reached out, and fingers coated in dried blood shuffled aggressively through Troy's markers without asking permission. Troy sat back, bristling.

"Come on, ladies," Jada challenged. "We all know each other's numbers already. How many?"

"How many what?" the Girl from Hell asked. An interesting voice with a little rasp to it, gentle by nature, but wary. She was on full alert.

"She's asking how many people you've killed," Erik said, just behind her. Her hunched figure startled, but she didn't turn around.

Like she was pretending she hadn't heard.

Since Troy was still staring, it seemed like the right moment to discourage either of the twins from latching on. Erik leaned forward over the Girl from Hell and opened his mouth like he was about to bite down on the back of her neck.

He came so close he almost caught one of the blue hairs riding the breeze between them. The nape of her neck bobbed in front of him, and he breathed in a clean, sweet scent just before he pulled back: like vanilla and soap.

Troy's wide eyes flashed to Jada and back to Erik again: *Dude, she's right there*.

Erik shrugged: *So?*

Troy swallowed a laugh and looked to Jada again. She kept frowning down at her paper, resolutely ignoring both of them.

"Six," the masked girl answered in a grizzled voice, sniffing Troy's green marker.

"Whoa, for serious? Second only to Erik!"

The Girl from Hell was still staring at her drawing like it mattered, still refusing to turn around. Like she was too scared to look at him. Because she was innocent. And he had known it all along. Despite the facts of the case, despite the Class A designation, *he had called it.*

Now Ledrick's little plan to bury him at camp would be Erik's way out. Once he'd charmed her into confiding in him, he could question

her, form an alternate theory of her case, and use her wrongful conviction to get the Wylie-Stanton repealed.

Erik shuffled through his modes, the filters he interacted with other people through. At camp he had stayed with his fairly default big-man-on-campus mode. Signal might need someone more accessible: "aw shucks" himbo, nice boy from a nice family, funny little brother. He was about to sit down and introduce himself with a sheepish smile when Dave's air horn echoed across the field.

And then they all had to run.

Not only is she innocent, Erik thought, watching the Girl from Hell through the grass, *she can't even hurt a mannequin.*

This was a highly complicated dismemberment drill, and she hadn't even started. She just sat motionless, staring down at her mannequin with wormhole eyes, tunnels of pain eaten through her haunted-doll face.

Not a bad look. But this was a timed exercise. And Dave could very well kill her if she failed.

Luckily, Javier came to the rescue, snapping her out of her trance. There was genuine friendliness in her expression while they spoke. She relaxed. And then Javier suggested they trade victims, and she smiled.

Erik's mouth twisted. How gallant. What exactly had inspired Javier to help out?

The first day of camp, when they'd been tasked with sharpening old vegetable can lids into shivs, he, Javier, and Jada had sat together. They had both been sort of flirting with her, but that turned into half-joking with each other as Jada became consumed by the task. Then, once she got her lids to razor-sharpness, Jada threw one with a flourish at the nearest tree. It lodged, quivering, in the bark. She did it again, the second one landing just above the first.

Erik, impressed, made her show him how. But Javier had recoiled and stopped vying for Jada's attention.

In contrast, Signal was drawing Javier in. Like he *wanted* a damsel in distress. How *old school*. Could Javier sense she was innocent? Would the others catch on as fast?

He couldn't let Signal's exceptional status get back to the Director, so he couldn't talk to her while the others were around. Maybe he could invite her to meet him after lights out, once he'd figured out the mode that charmed her. Erik caught up his own precisely dismembered mannequin and headed toward the woods. He'd already waited a year to talk to her. He could handle another couple hours.

No, I can't, he thought ninety minutes later, glaring through the window. *She won't last that long.*

Erik had just watched the Girl from Hell haphazardly pack her "body" in a trash bag, drag it through tall grass in full view of the main cabin, then throw it off the end of the dock into *maybe* fifteen feet of water. She was going to fail her first test at camp, guaranteed.

Before he could warn her, Kate sent her and the other one, Nobody, off to the girls' cabin with Jada. Erik stood up in the middle of whatever Kurt was saying to follow them.

"Erik," Dave had snapped. "Where are you going?"

"Bathroom," Erik called back, not stopping.

"Not the girls' cabin?" Dave stood.

"You caught me, Dave." Erik rolled his eyes. "I'm going to panty raid like it's 1999."

Dave's eyes narrowed as Troy laughed. Erik carelessly moved down the hall to the bathroom, bolted its narrow door, then climbed up on the sink and through the small window above it, landing soundlessly in damp grass just as Dave came around the side of the main cabin, clapping sarcastically.

"Nice try, buddy," Dave said. "Climb back up and be sure and unbolt the bathroom door on your way to fire circle." Then, "1999 wasn't that long ago, you know."

Erik rolled his eyes again.

Later, when Kate asked a returning Jada where the other girls were, she smiled aggressively wide. Like they might be in pieces.

Erik leapt to his feet. "They won't know where fire circle is. I'll go find them right now." And Erik turned and ran through the tall grass before Kate could say no.

The orange windows of the girls' cabin bobbed in front of him. Erik hauled himself up the rough wall of the cabin to peer in. The girls' long, crooked shadows wove through haloes of white-gold lamp light and waves of black mildew creeping up the walls.

The masked girl and blue-haired girl had their backs to each other as they made their beds. Neither of them spoke, but there was a tension like they both wanted to. Then the masked girl finished and left without a word. At last, the only thing between him and the Girl from Hell was the tatters of torn window-screen blowing toward him.

Erik neatly tucked one leg over the sill before rolling his shoulders after it. He was so accustomed to sneaking around, he didn't realize he had done this noiselessly until she almost walked into him.

"I climbed in through the window," Erik explained as she recoiled. "Kate wanted someone to check in on you, make sure you hadn't gotten lost."

She stared at him, still shaken by the surprise, apparently.

He added, voice friendly, "So I volunteered."

Not shaken. Scared. She was watching him like he was some wild animal she didn't know how to kill. She was completely terrified. Of *him*.

How?

This was the first time she'd properly seen his face—easily his most powerful asset—and her immediate reaction was *pure terror?*

He was the one who believed her. *He* was the one who was going to save her. And she just wanted him away from her.

How the hell was he supposed to mirror that?

The Girl from Hell summoned a paper-thin bravado and

announced, "Yeah, well, I might actually just go to bed. I'm pretty tired."

"Are you?"

"Yup."

"You don't have to come hang out—" He was trying to muster "aw shucks" himbo but there were too many inputs coming from her he didn't want to miss: her stricken face, her sensitive mouth, her delicate hands making laughable fists. "But you *should*, because they're not going to stop asking about your number until you tell them."

"Yeah? And what's yours?" she asked, backing away from him.

Erik froze in place, hoping she would register that he was not pursuing her, his mind completely on their motions as he answered, "Ten."

The expression she made in response was so cartoonishly frightened, so Scooby-Doo "g-g-g-ghosts!" over the top, he grinned. *Ma'am, you are at murder camp. What did you expect?*

"Yours?" he asked knowingly.

A fraction of a beat, then she raised her chin and said, "Eleven."

When she lied, she was even *more* transparent. Her face was so open to him right now it felt like he was relaxing in a luxurious bath with a stolen diary he could page through, every line a confession, every intimate thought laid bare. He could tell she was scared—her breath audibly accelerating, eyes rapidly dilating—and wanted to bolt. But instead, she was forcing herself to face him, to edge closer, to project "toughness." As though she could threaten *him.*

"You're a terrible liar," he said, trying not to smile at the understatement. And then "You're the Girl from Hell, aren't you? I thought I recognized you, Signal Deere."

Her eyes were really something this close: whole galaxies of sensation, spilling over with emotions, vivid and intense, and as far over his head as actual stars.

"I followed your case, and I have to say, I went back and forth on you. The evidence was overwhelming. But seeing you in person, it's obvious. You're innocent."

He'd hoped this would calm her. And there was a momentary release of tension in her forehead, relief at hearing someone say it.

But then her mouth shifted into a frown, chin lifting defiantly, over-compensating.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

He wasn't going to dignify that with a response.

"Your face is incredible. Every thought just bleeds right through," Erik said. Rude, he knew, but he wanted to shut down her bluff before she embarrassed them both by trying to lie.

Panic and calculation struggled on her face at the words.

She was walking around emotionally naked, and he could not look away. "You're *sure* you're a Class A?"

"They didn't keep me in solitary for fun—" she blustered, and then she noticed his messed-up eye.

Erik expected her gaze to drop, but it didn't. Her eyes stayed steady on his, softened as she registered his deformity, and then she held his stare more fiercely. As though she was trying not to drop eye contact so she didn't…hurt his feelings?

Don't feel sorry for me, Erik thought furiously. *You're the freak.*

"It's called coloboma," Erik snapped, stepping away from her, hiding his mouth behind his hand. "It's a congenital eye defect. Generally, there's two kinds of people: the ones who look away when they see it and the ones who make it a point to keep looking. You're a looker." He didn't explain lookers made up about ten percent of the people he'd met in his life. "You *really* shouldn't be here. You want to escape?" He nodded toward the bathroom door. "Go. Right now."

He meant it. The other campers would figure out what she was and take her down for fun, if Dave didn't report her to Ledrick first. She was innocent—of that he was certain. Now all he needed was to figure out an alternate theory of her case. And while he did, she'd be a lot safer in solitary.

But she needed to go now, before they installed her kill switch.

"Thanks for the pep talk," Signal drew herself up to her full, unimpressive height, "but you don't know me, and you have no idea what I'm capable of."

"I know you're not capable of killing," Erik shot back. "And I know you won't survive this place—"

But before he could go on, the masked girl came back in, and the chance was lost.

"Troy, you BUTT MUNCH!" Kurt screamed.

The sharp tang of mustard filled the air, a yellow handprint shone across Kurt's jaw; Troy's head thrown back in a triumphant laugh.

Dennis was hurrying out of their way as the twins circled each other. They tended to fight the roughest, being brothers, and Troy being a pure psychopath.

Javier said, with authority, "You keep playing that little mustard game, you're going to get your wrist snapped."

"By you?" Troy laughed.

"By *somebody*."

Erik had his back to them, standing on the bunk ladder as he tightened the covered sheet of his top bunk. He couldn't sleep in messy sheets and didn't care what Troy and Kurt did, but he guessed Javier had gestured to him because now Troy called, "Yeah, hey, Erik, you think the new girls are really together?"

"If they say they are." He kept his tone neutral.

"And blue-hair *decapitated* someone, huh? Oof." He could hear Troy's snaggle-toothed grin. "Hey, I got a head she can—"

"Would you *shut up?!*" Javier cut in again. "You play too much, Troy. Meanwhile half your clothes are on the ground, and it smells like ass in here because of all this mustard. Stop playing around and start cleaning up. I'm serious, man—"

So Javier liked Signal. Erik frowned. All Erik knew about the rest of the maniacs at camp was that they had to align with some aspect of his own psychological profile to get in. He trusted none of them. Records were most likely in the main cabin. Erik needed to get up to speed. He put on his black hoodie.

"You going out to meet Jada again?" Troy was on high alert whenever Erik snuck out, like a dog owed a walk. His hand was still gloved with mustard and smelled ass-like indeed.

"Why would I tell you if I was?" Erik said coolly, sliding on one sneaker.

"Hey, come on, man. You can't have both of them!" Troy's voice boomed through the cabin. "Back me up on this, Jav! Dennis?"

"I'm not here," Dennis said from under his book.

"If you're hooking up with Jada, then blue-hair has got to be up for grabs. Sorry, man, but fair is fair. There aren't enough girls at camp as it is—you don't get two of them!"

"'Blue-hair' just told you she has a *girlfriend*."

"You know what I mean." Troy scowled.

Erik bent forward, grabbed Troy's ankle, and yanked it toward him. Troy fell backwards, his surprised cry hanging in the air a moment after falling flat into a pile of his own dirty clothes on the floor beside his bunk.

If every camper had some aspect of Erik's personality, Troy was his dark side, the gleefully selfish impulses his mother had fought so hard to eradicate. It was not going to be fun being open adversaries. But Erik could not risk being unclear.

Erik stepped hard on Troy's hand as he sank down beside him, feeling the bones of Troy's fingers shift helplessly between his rubber sole and the floor, then got his forearm and about a quarter of his body weight across Troy's throat in one quick lunge. Erik shifted his weight between his foot and arm until a gasping Troy went still in the hope he would stop.

"I 'get' whoever I want." Erik smiled at last. "You get used to it." He playfully tapped Troy's burning cheek before standing up.

Troy lunged after him but immediately fell again, slipping in mustard and nylon basketball shorts. Erik pulled his hood down low and slipped out the front door.

In the main cabin, rustling newspapers echoed down the hall from Dave's room. Dishes clanked and clattered in the kitchen as Kate cleaned. Perfect. They'd assign any floor creaks to each other.

So. Camper files.

He ducked through Kate's doorway and plucked her keyring from her desk drawer, carefully muffling the keys between his fingers before drifting across Dave's doorway, down the hall, and into the nurse's office. He found the file box he'd been looking for but it required a padlock combination. Erik scowled.

He opened the door a crack and saw the back of Dave's head inches from his nose. Erik froze in place.

"New girl failed the pop quiz," Dave snapped. The clattering in the kitchen stilled.

"The tall one?"

"No, the other one. And I'm putting my money on it now, she's our first KIT."

Keep in touch? Erik frowned.

"Okay, I'll put her in the brackets," Kate said chummily. "What do you say, fifty?"

"A grand. I'll put a grand on it, that's how sure I am. Plus another fifty that she's KIT before week three."

"Well, I certainly hope not," Kate said. "Because headquarters isn't sending replacements for casualties before the end of the fiscal quarter…"

Killed in training.

Dave moved forward, toward the kitchen, and Erik counted to three before moving down the hall, back into Kate's room. He dropped the keys into her dirty laundry hamper and neatly exited her window.

If the Director and counselors priced in the death of campers, then odds were good that Dave was going to make a tidy sum on Signal. Unless Erik babysat her night and day, protecting her from the campers and counselors, while simultaneously not alerting anyone to the fact that she was the first innocent Class A and infinitely valuable to him.

How hard could it be?

Before noon on Signal's first full day at camp, she'd fallen off the obstacle course and Erik had barely gotten her out from under Jada with her face intact.

Erik's stomach had lurched at the sight of her blue hair in the green grass of the obstacle course, the red pearl of blood rolling down her cheek, the arrowhead in Jada's hand.

"I just want to make her face match her girlfriend's." Jada grinned up at him. "Or would that bother you? Is that why you came racing up here to check on *precious princess Signal?"*

But Jada was just being jealous. Erik had been careful not to let anyone see he was monitoring Signal. Now he talked Jada down as fast as he could, saying whatever came into his mind until Signal had staggered out of range and Jada was curled up in a ball across from him.

"...when the predator is in your own home, your own family, you can't make boundaries. The only boundary is your own skin and sometimes you don't even have that…"

"Erik," Jada sniffed, wiping at her face. "How do you know all that?"

He stopped short, then shrugged. "You shared a lot about your stepbrother during our 'group building' games."

"No, but like…"

He quickly pivoted. "Jada, if I hadn't come up here, what would have happened?"

"You wouldn't have wanted to make out with that bitch any time soon, let's put it like that."

He pulled his long, dark blond hair away from his face and it instantly flopped back again. "I don't want to make out with anyone, if you want to know the truth."

She had tried to hand off a note to him at the end of fire circle last night. He'd ignored it.

"Oh. Okay!" Jada let the word out like she'd been punched, then covered it with a laugh, pulling her knees into her chest. "Geez, I didn't realize I was such a bad kisser."

"It's not you." Erik shrugged. "I don't like kissing. I am down for

everything else but making out is just—" He stopped short of saying disgusting. "...uninteresting."

"Yeah, well, kissing is the *only* thing I'm interested in, so…" Jada shrugged quickly, but couldn't look at him.

Erik frowned. Class As were either highly obsessive, highly promiscuous, or both. He was strictly promiscuous and thought this was what he had in common with Jada. Apparently not.

"So, we're probably better off as just friends," Erik said. *Just friends* meaning *leave me alone*.

Jada nodded, then stood, knocked the grass off her knees, still not looking at him. "Well," Jada said with a shivery sigh. "Don't rat me out to Dave and Kate, *friend*."

She looked toward the trees. Kate was hurrying toward them across the field.

"Okay." He stood, stretched, and gave Kate a mocking wave. "As long as you don't try to carve up the new girl again."

Before Kate was in earshot, Jada blurted out in a rush, "Just tell me now, so it's not weird later. You like the new girl, or what?"

I am fundamentally incapable of "liking" anyone, Erik thought.

"Or what." He smiled easily.

And now Javier was laying it on just a bit too thick.

There was the whole shadowing Signal on the obstacle course thing. Now he was knee to knee with Signal, adjusting her…flower crown?

Dave had thrown down the mannequin—which, surprise, surprise, had washed up on shore overnight—in front of Signal at lunch and told her to get rid of it.

Javier, thinking quickly, had doubled back from the cabin, and tracked her down to declare her the May Queen of murder camp, apparently. No, nice try, keep it moving. Erik told Javier that Kate was looking for him. Javier shouldered past him with a look like a brandished fist.

That's *what Javier and I have in common*, Erik thought. *A short temper.*

Signal slowly stood up across from him, watching him uncertainly.

"Sorry if I *interrupted something*."

"We were just talking." But she dropped eye contact, cheeks flushing. The little *liar.*

"No fair. Javier never plays with my hair when he talks to me."

She guiltily knocked the chain of dandelions she wore to the ground. "I have a girlfriend, remember." And then she hurried away from him to the swing set. Erik stifled a sigh and fished a marshmallow out of the bag he'd stolen from the pantry.

A little gratitude might have been nice, considering he'd just saved her from Jada. A smidgen of goodwill. But no, she was tense, narrow shoulders high under a sweatshirt still covered in dried mud from the obstacle course.

A sense memory of her cotton candy blue hair against his cheek flashed through him, from when he'd pounced on her at the obstacle course.

Had *that* upset her?

He probably should have just tagged her arm. He *definitely* shouldn't have grinned right before he leapt on top of her. But he'd had a point to make: She didn't belong at camp, and she wasn't fooling anyone. Clearing her name was the only way to save her life. She couldn't fake her way through a mission, she couldn't even fake her way through a play fight.

But like his mom always said, Erik played too rough.

The moment his arms went around her, Signal collapsed into Erik. It took him completely by surprise; he'd expected scrapping, but instead, they were tightly embracing. He could feel the butterfly-wing stroke of her eyelashes right against his neck, the curve of her cheek against his rushing pulse, her narrow shoulders huddling into him like she'd found a place she fit at last. She'd been so afraid of him, and then this. No fight, no struggle, just surrender.

And his own reaction had been so bizarre. He'd shifted to take the impact as they hit the ground. His shoulder was still sore. They'd tumbled across the grass together, tangled up like lovers rolling in the surf, a situation Erik had not accounted for.

As they'd slowed to a stop, he'd thrown his arms wide and smiled up at her triumphantly.

"Weakling," he'd taunted. *I know what you are.*

She gazed down into his eyes in a moony stupor. Erik usually didn't let girls get this close unless sex was involved, and even then, eye contact during sex was not permitted. He was not used to mooning. That smell of vanilla and soap filled his mouth; it made him want to bite down. His hand flickered toward the curve at the small of her back, like they were alone on the field.

Then she rose, took three wobbling steps, and passed out.

She hadn't swooned. She'd been exhausted. The surrender was just a prey animal pretending to be dead in front of a predator.

Now she was shrinking away from him as he took the swing next to her. He was starting a critical conversation with a deficit of goodwill.

We both know you're innocent. Why won't you admit it? Who do I have to be to get you to open up?

His usual modes wouldn't work now. Putting on "aw shucks" himbo after last night would probably just alarm her. If he could just get her talking! Desperate, he made an uncharacteristically generous offer:

"Marshmallow?"

Signal recoiled even farther. "I'm a vegetarian."

He had no idea what that had to do with anything—they were marshmallows, not Steak-umms. But it fit with her overall vibe of being prim and annoying. *"Of course* you are,*"* he muttered and wolfed down the rest of the bag before she could change her mind.

Across the field, smoke drifted out of the burn barrel. Javier had been doing her homework for her. How *chivalrous*.

"First Javier saves you on the obstacle course, now he's hiding your body?" Erik watched her. "I don't want to get your hopes up, Signal, but he might have a crush on you."

"Doubtful." She hung her head so her hair blocked her face from his view, not taking the bait. Usually, girls liked to speculate on crushes; she was still retreating. He tried another tack: provoking anger.

"It's either that or he thinks you're a complete idiot," Erik went on. "Or maybe he likes you *because* he thinks you're a complete idiot? Though, personally, you strike me as the type who spends her weekends in the library."

"*Thanks*, but you can save the condescending psychobabble for your girlfriend," Signal snapped right back.

Ho ho! She *can* talk. Erik swallowed a surprised smile. "Jada's not my girlfriend, since you're *dying* to know. And since my 'condescending psychobabble' kept her from extending your smile to both ears, *you're welcome*."

Signal did her "g-g-g-ghosts!" grimace again and he burst out laughing. "What a face! Signal, you're awfully squeamish for a girl who *supposedly* decapitated someone and *allegedly* dates a burn victim."

"Yeah, well, I don't believe you have super psychic powers, so I guess we're even."

Thanks, Javier. Always so helpful when someone brought up the whole "apex manipulator" label. Everything he said would be read as a lie from this point forward. Awesome.

Scrunching the marshmallow bag into one fist, Erik re-calculated. If he laid out his history with the Wylie-Stanton, she wouldn't believe him. Bickering got her talking, but it was a hell of a segue into her murdered best friend. Maybe he could pretend he was also innocent, spin some story about being framed? Most likely she'd guess it was a manipulation.

Confide in me already, you sassy little weirdo.

Then, Erik had a strange thought: What if he went first? What if he was completely honest, just himself? Maybe that level of honesty would be self-evident.

Maybe she would run away screaming.

"That's what you've been telling everyone, right?" Signal was going on sarcastically. "That you kill people *with your mind.*"

"Oh, sure, yeah, that..." He tried frantically to game out some new mode, but he didn't trust his acting across from her—she was too infuriating. And if she caught him in a lie, it would all be over. So, Erik took a deep breath, and leapt. "That's not superpowers. That's just having a knack for psychology." He locked eyes with her as he

fought to find words for something he'd never said out loud. "You find a person's weakness, right? That's easy, people tell you their weaknesses all the time. Then you get friendly and slowly make them believe that weakness is gone. Once they believe that, boom." He made a gesture with his thumb, which was shaking now. "You break right through it, right into their heads."

Signal's eyes were bolted to his.

Erik waited for her to jump off her swing and run out of the clearing.

"How specific and rational that sounds," she said at last, then rolled her eyes. But her knees were angled toward him. She was no longer recoiling.

He'd pulled back the curtain on his spider brain to someone who wasn't his mom or Dr. Ledrick, and she was interested.

"Eh, it's hard to describe something so…intuitive." He smiled, a tremor going through him at the madness of hearing his innermost thoughts out loud. "What did Michelangelo say about sculpting? That he saw the angel in the marble and carved until he set him free? Not very helpful to every guy with a chisel. But that's the process."

She pulled her raggedy blue hair back and he feasted on her full facial expression: eyes still wary but locked on him, lips slightly parted. Intrigued.

"I'm surprised Dave and Kate don't let you teach a class." There was sly humor in her voice.

"I wish they would. I'm starting to get seriously bored…" He segued into the pitch, "That's why I was hoping you'd let me help."

"Help with what?"

"Help figure out who killed your best friend."

The chains of her swing stopped creaking, her knuckles white around them.

"How did you know Rose was my best friend?"

"Your face." Erik had clocked her expression when Dave threw the mannequin in front of her. He had been trying not to stare at her all day. But her face was so easy to read, it gave depth to everyone else's feeling—a sort of cheat sheet for the group dynamic. "When Dave was reaming you out back there. You weren't listening to him.

You were thinking of her. My guess is you loved her with all your heart."

The grief that flooded her now was so raw that watching her seemed suddenly inappropriate, like he'd walked in on her undressing. He averted his eyes and stood from the swing.

"I better put another forearm on the fire."

So, this got weird, Erik thought, cupping his face to block the smoke as he approached the burn barrel. He was barely thinking before he spoke—had no idea why he'd dragged Michelangelo into all this—but it was…working? They were talking. Finally. He grabbed a stick and tilted up the lid of the burn barrel.

An un-melted mannequin head smiled up at him.

"Signal?" Erik called. "What was your body made out of?"

"Some sort of silicone. Why?"

"Silicone as in silicone bakeware? As in, *highly heat and fire resistant?*"

In another instant she was beside him, staring down through the smoke in horror. "You've got to be kidding me!" Signal wailed.

"We'll stash her in the burn barrel and hide it in the woods," Erik offered.

They could get some stream water to douse the fire, and, he casually suggested, talk more about her case on the way there. Her forehead puckered, eyes darting up and to the right, searching for some excuse not to go.

"Or would you rather give me the bucket and have me get the water for you, Your Highness?" he snapped.

She jerked the bucket out of his hands, muttering, "There's nothing to talk about."

"*Really?*" He put all the skepticism he was capable of into the word. She was still pretending she wasn't innocent, after practically bursting into tears about how much she loved her supposed victim? Enough. "Because I had a lot of thoughts about that senior she was dating." Erik moved toward the little trail out of the forgotten playground. "Especially after his first alibi fell through."

"*What?*"

He turned around and a flare of early afternoon sun illuminated her from behind, an ice-blue halo cutting her face out from the green

and amber leaves, all bright as stained glass. He hadn't liked the blue hair in her photos. But in person, it had its moments.

He explained how Mike's alibi for the night of the murder had changed, and the haunted doll face in the blue halo contorted with pain.

"Oh." Erik's smile dropped. *If I could feel, I'd feel sorry for her*, he thought, *learning something that important, so long after it mattered*. "You didn't know. Sounds like there's something to talk about, then." And he took off down the trail without a backward glance, giving her the chance to pursue him.

Before he'd counted to ten, she was chasing him.

"How did you hear that?" She was breathless from running half a block.

"It was covered in the news." He didn't mention he'd been hunting down every shred of information about her for months. "How did you *not?*" he deflected. "Your lawyer never brought it up?"

"My public defender wanted me to take a plea deal from the start."

Erik caught the slight overlap in Signal's bottom teeth: no braces. There'd been no money for a lawyer either, even when her life depended on it.

"So what, you never suspected Rose's boyfriend?" he asked, hoping she'd take the bait.

"Yes, but not Mike. The other one."

"Ha!" Erik laughed, triumphant. Finally, it was out in the open. *"I knew you didn't kill anyone!"*

Silence.

He smiled down at her and found himself teetering at the edge of a gaze as rageful as a hellmouth.

"Is that what you wanted?" Signal choked. "To get me to admit that?"

"Yes?" Erik said, but she was already sprinting off, her running form so atrocious he burst out laughing.

But his laughter cut off when he realized she was running straight for the fence.

Erik had been told since childhood that he couldn't feel fear, so he

didn't identify the coldness that pierced the center of his chest. He only started running. As she sped up, the coldness deepened.

"Signal, stop—"

He threw himself forward and grabbed her shoulder, pulling her back just short of death.

"The perimeter of camp is the other side of that creek. You almost crossed the fence."

A bird sang overhead, the notes sharp and clear in the silence as Signal stood with her back to him and stared down at the ravine, like she was considering crossing it anyway. The cold pang sharpened, though he was holding still. Then her shoulders dropped, and she said, voice shaky, "So what, was that part of your master plan? Get me out here, then push me over the creek once you were done chipping away at me, Michelangelo?"

"Very clever wordplay, Signal, very *library* of you," Erik snapped, the pain subsiding at last. "Maybe if you weren't so busy cooking up clever verbal jabs you could process the fact I have *no reason to kill you*. You're the first interesting thing that's happened at camp since I got here. All I want is to help solve your case!"

"After you get done telling everybody else how innocent I am?" She turned to him. Her words were caustic, but her eyes were careful. Assessing.

"I won't tell anyone you're innocent. I swear." Erik put his hand on his heart. "Cross my heart and hope to die."

And, finally, *finally*, they started talking.

After her mom remarried, Rose moved out of their trailer park. She got new clothes, got new friends, and got very embarrassed whenever anyone remembered she used to hang out with Signal. He knew how painful this was for Signal to admit, because she said it slightly louder than everything else. Like she was punishing herself. Then, after whole grades of estrangement, Rose invited Signal to hang out, to sleep over, so Rose could sneak out to see her secret

boyfriend, who she called Mr. Moody. Signal's job was to cover in case Rose's parents checked in. They were strict about dating. Or at least, Rose's stepdad Tom certainly was, as was the church he belonged to, which Rose's mom Janeane had joined when they got married.

Signal was fully aware that she was being used. But she'd kept going back because Rose needed her. Because she'd loved her friend, no matter what.

She had attempted to draw a line, for Rose's own well-being, when Mr. Moody started giving Rose hard drugs. Rose had been killed not long after.

"I'm the only evidence he exists," Signal told Erik. "That's why he framed me."

"Can I see your hand?" Erik asked.

She hesitated, then held it up for inspection. Her hands, like the rest of her, were ineffectually delicate. The killer had likely decapitated Rose to cover up strangulation bruises that were almost certainly from larger hands. Otherwise, why take the time to saw through an esophagus?

Erik was halfway through explaining this when it occurred to him that she might consider it disturbing.

But Signal was nodding along as he spoke, expression focused. She was captivated by his spider-brain thoughts; it made him feel like Sherlock talking to Watson. He'd never talked to someone his own age like this for so long, and it was a relief. To not have to think through multiple layers to make a point. Like he'd been climbing with a fifty-pound pack on and she'd cut it from his shoulders.

"...He's the last guy you'd suspect, a fine upstanding citizen, cool and calculating enough to present a perfect façade." Erik was explaining his Nice Guy theory to Signal, picturing Skye's manufactured smile and flat eyes. He caught Signal's earnest stare and almost burst out laughing at the contrast. "Almost the polar opposite of you."

"What's that supposed to mean?" She frowned.

"Well, you're *obviously* pretending to be someone you're not." Erik could imagine her ducking through the halls of her high school, trying to look tough in a leather jacket she would never scuff herself, hiding her

kind eyes under keep-away blue hair. "The whole tough girl act you do, when you're the softest Class A in existence." They were in sight of the burn barrel now. "I told you last night I was worried about your odds here, and that was before you fell off the obstacle course and then fainted."

"Actually," Signal bristled, "when you're wrongfully convicted, it takes a certain inner strength—"

"Inner strength?" Erik laughed. "Okay, cool, but I'm talking about the kind that matters. Like when you're trying to survive camp. Or carry a bucket from point A to point B—"

"Wow, okay!" She snatched the full bucket away from him. "You want proof I can be a hard ass? Keep threatening me!" And she dumped the cold water into the barrel, sending a cloud of certainly carcinogenic steam straight into his face.

He bent over, coughing violently, the back of his throat burning.

"Erik?! Are you okay?!"

Then her little hand started whaling on his back.

Erik hated being touched without warning. Too many people had tried to surprise him into fights or into sex. But Signal's forthright smacks were different. They were an honest effort to help.

I'm safe with her, Erik thought.

A ridiculous thought. He knew he was by far the most dangerous person at camp. But he also knew if Signal had been at that last party, she would've stopped the girls in the hallway. Primly and annoyingly insisted he needed to go home. Ordered an Uber and made him drink some water while they waited for it to come, like she was trying to do now.

"I know it's stream water, but it's better than nothing," she was saying with urgent concern. Even though she'd seen his spider-brain and been told he was an apex manipulator, she was treating him like a human being. "Erik? Say something?"

She's…sweet, Erik thought. *It's not conscious. It's just how she is.*

Last night when she'd held his stare. It was not pity, but kindness. Lookers were rare, but Erik had only met one or two genuinely kind people in his entire life. A kind Class A? He was in the presence of a unicorn.

"You can't help it, can you?" he choked out, laughing. "You're way too sweet to be here."

Her eyebrows drew in, lower lip crimping, like this was a bad thing. "I'm not *sweet.*"

"You're sugar, cubed." He dried his streaming eyes with his sleeve, throat still raw. "Also, when did I threaten you? I didn't threaten you."

"What you said last night! And again, just now! That I wouldn't survive here!"

"I'm not—I wasn't trying to *threaten you*, okay? It's just true. You shouldn't be here because you're innocent. Maybe last night I hoped to startle you into confessing, because it's, uh…not an easy thing to admit in this group."

"Whatever," she said. Then, sincerely, "Sorry about the steam, though."

"No big deal," he said, suppressing a cough.

Erik was glad she'd lost her temper, relieved she felt comfortable enough to be angry at him. It gave him a chance to prove he was safe, too. For her, at least. If Troy had pulled that little stunt, he'd be on the ground right now with a mannequin fist down his throat. But thanks to his mother's training, Erik could choose when to behave. He was a serial killer, sure, but he was also *a gentleman*.

"So if Mr. Moody killed Rose," Erik continued with authority, once the fake girl parts had been gathered into the barrel, "we just have to figure out who he was..."

Signal took the other side of the barrel, cringing apologetically.

"I feel like I'm talking your ear off about all this."

"I'm *riveted*," Erik said honestly. It wasn't just the case, it was her. He stayed laser-focused on people's expressions during conversations, and what he saw here was seldom cheerful. But Signal's face was a bridge to everything else, because she noticed everything: birds flitting along the path, the vaulting branches of the trees, white wheels of pollen floating past. It was like he had been walking around camp in the dark all this time and now he had a flashlight.

He particularly liked the baffled frown she did sometimes, like she was as surprised by her own thoughts as he was. She would bring up specific, vivid details: Rose's stepdad had pores like an orange peel,

Rose's mom Janeane smelled like too much mouthwash. And when she said Dave looked like a Quantico reject starting a Little League team, he almost dropped the burn barrel laughing.

Erik had never set foot in a high school. But when Signal described watching Rose and Mike and his friend Vaughn flirting from her little weirdo corner, he knew where he'd be standing. With Rose and Mike and Vaughn. Hell, they would've been trying to stand with him.

Would he have noticed Signal, staring?

The thought made him uneasy. Because he felt certain somehow that, even outside camp, she would have recognized him.

She called out other interesting details he never would have learned online: Rose had installed a lock inside her door, to keep her mom from "snooping." Tom was controlling. Janeane kept a secret pack of cigarettes in a planter she only smoked when he wasn't around and seemed a little too afraid he would find out.

The only factor he would have to correct for was Signal's profound naivete. When he suggested Rose might have been sleeping with Vaughn, she was somehow offended. And when he gently explained Rose was being intimate with Mr. Moody, she was scandalized.

"She would've told me if she'd done it with him or anyone else." Signal shook her head. "Because whenever she'd do stuff first, she'd make a point of letting me know—"

Erik choked on a laugh. Had she meant to tell him she was a virgin? But no. She was going bright red.

"I hate you," Signal said.

Erik laughed again, too loud, but was strangely disappointed. His mother had given him only one piece of advice about sex, dispensed quickly after a mechanical talk on protection. She had locked her sharp blue eyes with his, a rare gesture, and said: "A girl's first time should be with someone who loves her. Don't ever be any girl's first."

A shame. He'd sort of assumed they'd hook up while working on the case. It would've been good cover if Kate or Dave caught them sneaking around together. But if her friendship with Rose was any indication, Signal had all the emotional boundaries of a vengeful

poltergeist. Cleaner to keep things platonic. He would be her Sherlock, and she would be his Watson.

End of story.

Erik did not appreciate Kate and Dave moving the girls into the boys' cabin after Dog Mask showed up. For one thing, if an interloper wearing a rubber mask was trying to kill off campers, it was a strategically weird move to put them all in one highly flammable location.

And it also meant Erik no longer got his nights off. Now Signal would be in constant reach of Troy and Javier. He could guess the thoughts that went through their heads when she went to stash her towel and toiletry caddy in the showers.

He wondered if they, too, searched through the caddy for her distinctive soap. Disappointingly, he found only plain Ivory. The vanilla smell was just her, a fact he instantly regretted knowing.

When he came out of the bathroom, he clocked Javier planting a note under Signal's pillow. As the others trooped to fire circle, Erik hung back, and when the cabin stood empty, retrieved it.

Javier had drawn a dandelion and written "flower for sure" underneath. Yikes. Erik had assumed it was a note to meet up after lights out, but Javier was still working his Man-Heidi angle. Erik slid it back under her pillow, confident it would only make Signal cringe.

Instead, she totally fell for it.

He learned this the next day, during the Zap Sauce lesson. He and Javier were assigned as partners. They stonily filled out their packet, then Erik slipped over to Troy's table.

"Hey, *buddy*. What got into you today?" Erik smiled, settling heavily across the table from Troy and flexing his injured hand between them conspicuously.

Troy shrugged, holding a yellow pencil at an angle against the table. He grabbed the eraser end and snapped it hard against the table's edge. "You know me, I like to leave it all out on the field."

"You could have left a *body* out on that field." Erik smiled coldly. "She was up like fifteen feet."

"Only if she let go." Troy shrugged and snapped the pencil against the table again. "What, man, Dave and Kate make you junior counselor or something?"

On the obstacle course this morning, watching from the window cut-out in the tallest climbing wall, he'd clocked Troy at the bottom of the single rope that Signal was clumsily climbing down.

Troy's lips had flickered a little over his clenched-teeth smile, hand clutching the rope. Then he'd jerked it toward him, to pull Signal back from the wall far enough that she would slam back into it and fall.

But Erik was faster. He grabbed the top of the rope and twisted it around his hand to tauten the slack before Troy could complete the gesture. Troy had locked eyes with him then, grinned, and pulled the rope down hard, like a hunchback ringing a bell. Erik's thumb was wrenched almost out of joint, the pain excruciating, but he held the rope until Signal got to the ground and ran off without noticing either of them.

His thumb still hurt like hell.

"Don't do this to yourself. You know I have plans with that one—" Erik was starting, when they both heard Signal's voice, girly and nervous.:

"Thanks for your drawing!" she was gushing to Javier. "It's incredible. I like, want it tattooed on me."

Troy put his hand over his mouth. Erik rolled his eyes dismissively, but there was no getting around the fact that Signal had just walked up to Javier. *After* Erik had left their table.

"What's the hold up, then?" Troy said, snaggle-tooth grin wider. "You want her, you get her, *right?*"

"Don't do this to yourself," Erik repeated coldly.

"I can't help it, I'm bored." Troy flicked the pencil against the table edge harder. "Don't you ever get bored?"

"Let's find something for you to do, then." Erik grabbed Troy's pencil and stabbed it hard into the plastic pan of Zap Sauce between them. The pencil punched straight through between the planks of the

table, sending a stream of acid directly down onto Troy's shoe. Troy let out a yelp, kicking his melting sneaker off as the air filled with the smell of burning rubber, then hopped out from behind the picnic table bench to go rinse his foot in the sink.

Kurt hurried to nest the leaking plastic tub into a new one, then started cleaning up the ground with some paper towels and a nervous expression.

Erik made no move to help. He wanted to hear what Javier and Signal were talking about.

"Don't laugh," Signal was saying.

Don't worry, Erik thought, *Javier hasn't laughed since the last time he saw an old lady fall down a flight of stairs.*

"...but I used to be sort of a goth. Not like, super goth. As goth as you can be when you're broke."

She said *broke* louder than the rest of the sentence.

Javier asked, "So like, you went around in a trench coat and tiny sunglasses?"

Erik fought to hold back his laughter. It was a struggle not to whip around to see her reaction. Mortified, he hoped.

"Noooo!" Signal said, mortified. "Just like, a lot of horror movie T-shirts. All black every day. Shared lots of Instagram quotes about wanting to hurry up and die."

It was true, he knew from going through her social media feeds, she loved horror movies—deep cuts old and new, like *Phantasm* and *Hell House LLC.* He'd been impressed, but it had counted against her in his guilty vs. innocent spreadsheet.

Javier probably hadn't even seen the whole *Elm Street* series.

"That's… really hard to picture." Javier cringed. And then, like he was trying to comfort her. "But I bet you made it work."

"No, I did not," Signal laughed, and Javier joined in.

Don't sit there and laugh at yourself with him, Erik scowled. *He wouldn't have even* seen you *in high school. I would have appreciated your edgy little T-shirts, at least.*

Not that it was a competition, obviously, but—

"I bet you were breaking all the goth guys' hearts…" Javier was

going on. "Back before, death was just something in movies. It was more of like, an aesthetic than reality? Whereas now . . ."

"It's waiting at the bottom of the obstacle course?"

"Not while I'm around."

Erik rolled his eyes.

"So now that you've ditched the tiny sunglasses," Javier said, like a daytime talk show host, "how would the Signal of today represent herself?"

She paused. "Your dandelion."

Erik's stomach turned over, and he frowned. Did she think her voice sounded "hot" like that? Because it did. His fingers rang with pain, and he realized he was biting his nails again. He thrust his hand away, then caged his head in the darkness of his folded arms, overcome with exhaustion. He wanted to go back to his bunk, pull his covers over his head, and sleep. They didn't feed them enough at this cheap-ass murder camp. He was trying to block out their conversation now, but he couldn't.

"...If you want, I could give you a temporary version," Javier was saying.

"Oh yeah? Do it…"

Erik stood abruptly and made his way into the kitchen to see if he could find something sweet, just as Troy staggered out of the lost and found.

"Joke's on you, asshole! Found some sweet 90s Etnies!" Troy yelled, hopping on one foot to show off some ancient skateboarding shoes. Erik shoved him backwards, hard, and crossed the hall toward the pantry. The nurse's office was open, he saw, and a sheath of manila file folders was splayed across the table, each camper's name on a tab.

Erik pivoted into the office, closing the door silently behind him, and found Javier's file. Only one count, a homicide. Javier had caved in a guy's skull during a fugue state.

Erik smiled, smug. As kills went, it was disgraceful: unplanned, sloppy, and immature. Javier's temper had gotten the better of him, and now he was acting like a happy-go-lucky flower enthusiast who got on the wrong bus to murder camp.

More like sociopath for sure, Erik thought. Then he heard the Zap Sauce timer beeping in the kitchen and stepped back into the hall.

"…you strike at the King, you better make sure he's dead!' and then he rushes my freaking foot!!" Troy brayed.

Erik didn't have to look up to know Signal was still staring at him in the bathroom mirror. He re-wrapped his thumb over the sink, moments from yelling at Troy to leave. Troy seemed to be deliberately making his story as long and inane as possible, but Erik shot him a look deadly enough to shut him up, and Troy, at last, left the bathroom.

The moment the door closed Erik turned on Signal.

"I need your help," Signal stammered, blushing. She explained there were newspaper clippings on Rose in the pantry, blushing harder with every word. She was dangerously red when she finally suggested, since he had kitchen duty tonight, maybe he could get the clippings and "…we could, like, read them later?"

"Okay," he said, dropping eye contact and turning to leave. "After lights out."

He could guarantee he already knew whatever those clippings said. But he wanted to see her react to them, and of course after lights out was the only time they could investigate. So why had she blushed like that?

Trembling, she had been *trembling.* Not with fear, just nerves. More nervous than she'd been across from Javier, for sure.

Almost like she was asking him out or something.

Erik remembered his most recent favorite song all at once, the last single-repeater before camp. He usually had trouble recalling melodies, but the whole song returned to him with breathtaking clarity. If he could carry a tune, he would have sung it out loud. Unsung, its wildness rang through him, and he started running. He jumped and touched the lowest branch of the highest tree between him and the main cabin and was rewarded with a cold starburst of dew.

Dennis was just exiting the main cabin front door.

"Dennis!" Erik called, and the slight figure froze, then relaxed as their eyes met. "Hey, I can't stay up tonight, I've got a—a thing I have to do."

The last couple nights, Erik and Dennis had found themselves talking after the others had gone to bed. Erik had tried his filter-free no-mode style and found Dennis very receptive. It let Erik blow off steam since he couldn't talk to Signal as often as he wanted.

And Dennis needed to talk. He was carrying around something that could only come out a little bit at a time.

"Sure, fine. It's not like we have a standing appointment or something." Dennis looked down at the ground.

"We could?" Erik felt expansive. "If you wanted to."

Dennis shrugged and mumbled something that sounded like "okay." Erik nodded, not wanting to make too much of a thing out of it. Before he went into the kitchen he hurried past into the pantry, slid a shaky hand under the lowest shelf, and felt cool newsprint. He smiled.

Erik didn't notice his low blood sugar was gone, although he hadn't eaten anything.

Erik stood over Signal's bed.

"Erik?" she whispered.

"Shhh."

He turned and moved quickly out of the cabin, cringing at how loud she was as she followed him, furious at the thought of someone waking up and stealing their time together. But in another moment the soft grass swallowed their steps, the stars swirling in deep tides above them for millions of miles.

"You got them?" Signal whispered.

"Oh yes. Right under the shelf, like you said."

"I kept wanting to get them during the Zap Sauce lesson, but I

never got the chance." Erik's mouth twisted. That was a lie, and she knew it.

"No?" He kept his voice cool. "Too busy holding hands with Javier?"

"Wow," she gasped. "I didn't realize you were monitoring my motions in class, creeper."

"*Creeper?!*" That was so unfair—he could think of a dozen times today alone he had held himself back from looking at her. But as he turned on her, about to fire back, the humor in her eyes stopped him short. They seemed larger in the dark and filled with friendly starlight.

"In *what world* am I a creeper?" he managed at last.

"Maybe in the world where you creeped, crept, whatever, into my cabin the first night I was here?" Signal looked sheepish but curious as she went on. "Nobody even said you marked me."

Yes, he had. And Troy had behaved himself for a couple days. His mistake was not marking Signal *harder*. He should have licked the side of her face. Maybe then he'd still have two working thumbs. Erik deflected:

"*I* marked you? And what's this?"

Erik hooked his finger around the cuff of her sleeve, scrupulously avoiding her skin as he jerked the cloth up the delicate line of her arm and revealed Javier's stupid dandelion. "So, Javier draws on your arm, even though he *knows* you're in a relationship, and *I'm* the creep?! Okay, Signal."

"Come on, Javier is a *nice guy*."

"Javier is a *sociopath*."

"Aren't we all!"

"*You're* not," he said, and once he was sure the tree line cut them off from view of the main cabin, he snapped on the lantern, and pulled out the sheath of clippings.

He could sense her trepidation as a faded newsprint image of Rose caught the light and softened his tone. "Anyway, I am willing to look past your vicious name-calling, so we can discuss why a stack of year-old clippings on your case is hidden in the pantry. Someone's been hoarding them away and they might be—pay attention here, because I'm about to use this word in its *appropriate context*—they might

be a creeper. Should we search Javier's bunk for scrapbooking supplies?"

She bit the inside of her cheek so she wouldn't laugh. The tell was a crooked little frown, beneath eyes that definitely twinkled.

Erik never felt funnier than when Signal bit the inside of her cheek.

They sat close enough to read the articles at the same time, though it was all stuff he knew. He tried to keep a thread of space between them, but she kept huddling close, as though she were cold. He had the impulse to ask if she wanted his hoodie, like they were a real couple on a real date. And he wondered, had Signal been on a date before?

Erik hadn't. He'd never offered, and girls knew better than to require things from him. *This* was the closest he'd gotten, and this wasn't a date at all. Though the setting certainly qualified as romantic, their little bubble of lantern light high above the sweeping woods of camp, below an ocean of stars. But he was just here to look at her.

As expressive as she was in conversation, Signal's reading face stayed disappointingly neutral. The only real motion was her eyes scanning the lines of newsprint, fast and focused. Maybe that was why his focus kept drifting to her mouth.

He hadn't given much thought to the term "cupid's bow," but her top lip defined it perfectly. Her lips shone as though glazed. *Like a donut*, Erik thought absently. *No wonder she makes me hungry.*

Signal looked up then like she'd heard the thought and asked, "Did you get to the part about Mike yet?"

"I already finished," he rapped out.

"I'll save you a seat at the library," she joked, but she wasn't smiling. "Mike just 'up and left'? Why would he do that, unless . . ."

"Unless what?"

"Unless he felt guilty?"

"You really are, like…like a five-foot-tall piece of cotton candy or something."

"First of all, I'm five four and three quarters—"

"Signal, I'm sorry to tell you this, but whoever killed Rose feels no

guilt. Because he is a psychopath. And they don't feel guilt, or fear, or love. They just act like they do…"

Signal seemed to be inspecting him now. He wasn't sure what she was looking for, but when he was done talking, she asked, politely:

"Are you a psychopath?"

"Self-transcendence! That's the word!" Erik's mother beamed, throwing out her arms. They were walking along the beach below their house in Pacifica, in the last week of summer before school. Skye was at college orientation. It had been amazing to have him out of the house, to have it be just him and his mom on her day off. "Cloninger describes it as 'the spontaneous feeling of participation in one's surrounding as a unitive whole.' I call it the beach!"

"That's how I feel about climbing," Erik offered. "Maybe I have that one?"

She gave him a smile, the bright sun turning her blonde hair almost white against the pale blue sky. He was thirteen but they stood eye to eye, though she constantly scanned the ground as they walked, searching for sea glass.

"No, I don't think so. You *are* capable of degrees of feeling, Erik, I know that," his mom said. "Psychopathy is a spectrum. We're only beginning to understand what a 'successful' psychopath is. Bold and fearless, that's for sure—" She kept smiling, gaze fastened on his ear. "And you are capable of tremendous self-discipline with the right rewards! But these advantages come with limitations. Your feelings are shallow *relative to what a standard person feels*. Except your anger—as we know," her eyes flickered to his, then returned to the ground, "and a certain capacity for self-congratulation. Which must seem very unfair, but trust me, there are worse things to feel than anger. You don't have the highs, but you don't have the hurt."

He'd heard this about a billion times, but he nodded politely.

"As your mom it's my job to get you through this world in a way that protects you, and protects other people *from you*," his mom went

on. "And when there's no feelings, no conscience, that boils down to behavior. Rationally, you know how you should behave. And I *love* your behavior these last six months, Erik. Your conscientiousness. Your effort. Keep it up!"

"Okay, but…" But he was feeling something right now, a sort of tightness in his chest. As though he couldn't breathe, but it was not air he was short on but the necessary words to explain himself. "Dad says you can't prove a negative, so how can you know for a fact what I *don't* feel?"

She thought this over, then said, "You're visiting Skye in a few days, right? Your big brother is about to go off to college, and he wants you to see where he is, and meet his new friends, and spend quality time together before school begins. How does that make you feel?"

Erik's shoulders sank.

"Excited? Apprehensive?" Her smile was brittle. "Sad, that your brother is moving out of the house? How do you feel about this big fun visit?" she pushed. "*Anything?*"

"Like I have to go, so I'm going," he said dully.

"I know, Erik." She sighed. Then, bravely, "And that's *okay!* It's just the way you're built!"

So, it had been very confusing for both of them, a few years later, when in the process of creating his dataset for the Wylie-Stanton, he'd taken the gold standard of psychopathy tests, the Hare Checklist, and scored 19.

A clinical diagnosis of psychopathy required at least a 30.

"So, I'm *not* a psychopath." He'd said, as they stared at his results on the desk between them in her office. There were no more chatty walks on the beach, at that point.

"You're something else." His mother had frowned. "Let's call it…a Class A."

Erik appreciated Signal asking him outright. He had vivid memories of people whispering "*He's* the one? The psychopath?!" to each other at parties when they thought he was out of earshot. It hadn't hurt his reputation, maybe it had even enhanced it.

But they never asked him to his face.

If they had, he wouldn't have known how to answer and didn't know what to tell Signal now.

Erik had been treated from childhood with the assumption he *was* a psychopath, but by the most reliable empirical diagnosis, he was not. Either his mother's treatment had worked, or these labels were meaningless.

"I'm a Class A," Erik said. "So are you. But we couldn't be more different."

"We're not *that* different."

"We're a photo and the negative." *You are good,* he thought. *The good part of me. Which explains why you're so small and weak.*

Despite the non-answer, she stayed unafraid, going through the rest of the clippings. She made an interesting comment that suggested Tom was on painkillers, painkillers that kept going missing. He was sure Signal had been drugged in the shed and hoped some memories might still be retrieved if she would just go back over them. But when he offered to hypnotize her, she acted like he'd asked her to take off her clothes.

"I tried that," she said coldly. "With *professionals*."

"And nothing came back?"

"Nothing that made sense. Pieces. I don't even know if they're real or forced memories or what…" She huddled into herself, clearly wanting to end the discussion there, but as she looked down at the picture of Rose in her lap, he felt her reconsider. Some cold part of her took charge.

Signal lifted her head, set her jaw. Reached for the pain like she knew it was where the truth would be hiding. Erik liked that about her most of all.

"I remember music. Not what song, or the lyrics…this is so pointless."

She covered her eyes with her hands, and the pain that went

through her dully echoed in him. Some deeper form of mirroring? It was like her emotions were so intense, they were contagious.

"Tell me anyway," Erik said gently. "What else was there?"

"...I remember a thermos."

"What kind?"

"The kind like you'd get in an old plastic lunchbox. It had the Transformers on it?"

"Really! Was there anything in it?"

"I don't know. This is stupid—" Signal's hands flickered, about to give up, and Erik gently covered them with his. "Wait, wait, don't open your eyes yet. Just a minute. See if it comes."

He half expected her to bat him away. He hadn't exactly denied being a psychopath, and she must have seen Kate sprinting to the field, to get him away from Jada. But she had brought him out here into the dark, she had leaned into him for warmth, and now she let his hands cover her eyes, so his words were the only thing she saw. It was real trust, something he was rarely given. She kept surprising him, and surprising people were precious. They gave him hope there was something ultimately unknowable in people, a spark that could not be predicted or profiled and so could never be controlled. What another time might call a soul.

Then he saw Kate's and Dave's flashlight beams crossing the ground below them.

"We have to go."

He leaned forward, swept the clippings under the stage, and snapped off the lantern. "They're doing a bed check. Come on—"

Signal rose like a sleepwalker, disoriented by the darkness. Erik took her hand to guide her around the bleacher. He thought she'd pull away once she was clear, but she didn't. Signal's hand stayed in his, like it was safer there.

If another girl had tried this, he would've pulled his hand away, wouldn't have let her kid herself about who he was. He had done such terrible things with these hands. But Signal knew that, and still held on like he was her way home.

Now, if anything, it was Erik holding *her* hand, slowing a little so he didn't lose her. Just her hand had that flashlight effect on him,

heightened his awareness of everything. The stars overhead pierced like notes, time was measured in breath. Only when they reached the cabin did her hand slip from his. He wanted to see her face, but she seemed intentionally to duck her chin and hide it away as he lifted her up to the windowsill.

Don't be shy, I won't bite.

The soapy vanilla smell washed over him, as it had that first day when he pretended to bite her neck, and he imagined doing it right now. Lightly grazing her delicate skin with his teeth. The sound she would make if he did.

Erik got into his top bunk just as Kate's flashlight swept through the door, and he lay very still in the dark, unable to stop smiling.

They were under the stars, back on the bench of the amphitheater. But Signal was now dressed like a girl from the 1950s, in saddle shoes and a poodle skirt, and before he could ask her about it, she took his hand in hers.

"Erik," Signal said, breathy as Sandy from *Grease*, "I know I told you I wanted to talk about my case tonight but…actually? I brought you here because I wanted to tell you…that I like you."

"What?"

"Yes, Erik. I like you…*like that*. Is that okay?"

Signal mooned up at him. Her heart-shaped mouth glistened like a Valentine's Day lollipop. Just as he leaned in close enough to brush her lips with his, Erik woke up.

He blinked fast, the dark of near dawn shading the water-stained ceiling above him, almost gasping for breath, hair plastered to his neck with cold sweat.

What the hell was that shit?

"You don't have a vitamin deficiency." Dave frowned, staring straight forward at the obstacle course.

"How do you know?" Erik snapped. "I'm having weird dreams. Mood swings. I am *not* in my right mind."

"Kate might have some multivitamins—you can ask at dinner. Now get in line. We've got a special activity today." Dave pulled out his whistle and made a point of blowing it right by Erik's head.

Erik knew from the moment Dave announced Color Wars that this was a Ledrick game. A group confrontation experiment. Sick dread knotted inside him as they all got on a line and were handed the sharpies they would use to "slash" each other's throat.

The rest of them were excited. There was a carnival giddiness in the air that, as usual, he could not share, that lasted right up until Kate handed out the lists of items that they had to find for the Scavenger Hunt.

"Find the camper who wet the bed until they were thirteen?" Kurt read aloud to the picnic table, then looked up at Kate. "No one's going to come clean about that. How are we supposed to figure that out?"

"That's the game." Kate smiled coldly. "Find a way to make them tell."

Well, that was one way to announce a torture session. Erik hauled himself up onto his favorite branch of the sycamore, to get a better view of how things broke down.

Signal would have him, Nobody, and Javier defending her. But Dennis was also a concern. Because Dennis wasn't ready to share his item and he was the least able to defend himself in person.

How far would camp let them go, that was the question. If he knew Ledrick, they were meant to escalate this until one of them was dead, to keep any real alliances from forming. And he knew well enough who Dave expected to die.

The others were starting to eye one another now, the twins huddling closer, Jada curling up defensively, Nobody flexing her long scarred hands under the table.

And then Signal balled up her paper.

"Congratulations, Signal," Kate snapped. "You're the first person disqualified from the Color War. Enjoy missing dinner."

Signal's eyes were steady on Kate as she threw the ball into the center of the table, crossed her arms, and lifted her chin.

Oh, Weakling, Erik thought, *you just saved all of us.*

Holding Kate's gaze through the leaves, Erik crumpled his own list, and threw it down after hers.

They made Signal pay for it, of course.

Erik was clenching his fists so hard the skin on his knuckles was ready to split. He didn't notice because Signal was on the ground, where Dave had kicked her. A three-pound silicone hand had just sailed past the back of her head, missing the weak spot at the base of her skull by inches and glancing off her shoulder.

Dave was eight and a half feet from him, the back of his neck bright red. One good leap, he could get his hands around Dave's head and snap his neck. But then Kate would set off his kill switch and Signal would still be trapped here.

Yet as Erik continued to stare, still considering it, Dave's collar twitched. There was a pink, circular divot in the red weathered skin at the back of his neck.

"What did you come here to LEARN, SIGNAL?" Dave shouted.

But Signal's mind had left her eyes; they were portals to a universe of pain in which Dave was just a speck.

"WHAT DID YOU COME HERE TO LEARN?!"

"Not to end up like you," Signal said calmly. A look of begrudging admiration passed around the rest of the group.

"What did you say?"

"You take broken kids and make them worse," Signal said, her voice cold and weary. "That's not work. That's a waste. Of all of us."

Nobody's laugh caught in her throat and Jada's hand slapped over her mouth.

Erik was stunned. He'd seen Signal choke enough on the obstacle

course, he knew she was far from fearless. But the little weakling was risking death, not because she lacked fear, but because there was something in her she regarded as more important than her physical existence.

A soul? Was that it?

Up until the moment Signal turned on Dave, Erik had seen goodness as compliance. A performance to please a higher authority, a lie. But Signal's goodness was the ultimate rebellion: a refusal of any authority higher than what was *right*.

The Director's system depended on them wronging each other. The more selfish and predatory they were, the more power camp had to hurt them at one another's hands. But the system had no counter for kindness, or generosity, or this quiet self-possession that stood beyond the fear of death. Signal's goodness was a fight for the truth and the truth was the one thing Erik respected. She wasn't just sweet, she was something far more powerful.

Sublime, Erik thought. That was how angels were described.

Signal was sent off to make her mannequin disappear for good, Jada assigned to her as both a buddy and a threat.

Dave made the rest of them run the obstacle course. Erik normally would have loved this, but his head was spinning. He found himself clinging to the apartment façade and scanning over the forest like he could find her.

What he saw instead was Dave furtively pulling Troy aside.

Erik leapt back down the façade, almost knocking Nobody off a windowsill, landing so hard in the cool grass he tumbled forward. He got himself to his feet and sprinted over to where Dave and Troy were.

"Where are you sending him?" Erik yanked Troy back from Dave, saw the rubber mask in his hand: a big bad wolf head, with patches of fake fur framing its latex grin.

"Girls are about to get a pop quiz!" Troy grinned.

Erik saw it immediately: Troy jumping out of the woods and going straight for Signal. Jada joining in, the two most vicious campers goaded on by Signal's panicked expression, chasing her into the woods. Finishing her off. Making out with her blood on their hands before throwing her into the same grave as the mannequin.

The cold pain rang through Erik's chest like his heart had been bitten to the quick.

"Hey, Lisa Left-Eye Lopes," Dave yelled, "no one asked you! So shut up and shimmy back up on that course or—"

Erik grabbed Dave's wrist, hard, and wrenched off the fob. Dave went bone white under his tan as Erik pointed it at him.

"I know you've got a switch," Erik said calmly. "I saw the scar. Looks recent, too." *You want away from us as much as we want away from you.*

"Aw shit, kill him, man!" Troy's eyes were huge, his leer more ghoulish than the Halloween mask in his hand. "You're a *legend* if you kill him, come on!"

"Erik's the dead one now. And he knows it," Dave hissed, frozen in place. "Unless *you hand that fob back to me right now*."

"Ledrick still needs me, or I wouldn't be here," Erik said, and Dave shrank back at the name. Erik kept the fob where Dave could see it, both of them aware of Troy's twitching excitement, and what Troy would do if he got it. "Dave, calm down," Erik went on, "I don't want to kill you, I want to make a deal."

"If I start negotiating with campers, Kate kills me," Dave pointed out. "You kill both of us, you're still trapped inside the fence with Dog Mask on the loose. I'm not the biggest threat at this camp, Erik."

"No. I am," Erik said. "Kate will never know, I promise. I have two asks and they are not big."

"I can't even take what a pussy you're being!" Troy screeched and made a grab for the fob. "My turn, dickhead—"

Erik deftly passed the fob to his other hand, and cocked his head at Dave: *How long do you think I can hold him off?*

"What do you want?" Dave spat out.

"First, whatever you and Troy were about to do, call it off."

"What?!" Troy cried. "C'mon, man, it's Color Wars!"

"Forget it, Troy," Dave said. "Don't go near the girls."

Troy sputtered helplessly. "I finally get to do *one fun thing*—"

"Shut up, Troy," Erik said. "Second thing. You will protect Signal, from this point out, like your life depends on it. Because it will. Do you understand?"

Dave's face contorted into something like a pitying smile.

Erik leaned forward, grabbed the side of Dave's head, and drove the pad of his thumb straight into his eye. Dave's eye blinked closed but not completely, lids twitching and fluttering under Erik's thumb like a captive butterfly.

"I don't need a fob to keep my end of this." Erik pivoted his back to Troy, to keep him from seeing what he was about to do. He didn't want to get Troy too excited.

Erik pressed Dave's eyeball up against the back of his skull with his thumb, stopping just short of the point where a grape would go squish. Dave grit his teeth but did not dare move away with the fob still trained on him.

"If anything even *mildly unpleasant* happens to her, from this point forward," Erik promised, "you will spend the rest of your life hearing all those funny eye jokes you like so much. Understand?"

Dave made a guttural sound and Erik released him, then put the fob in his hand.

They stared at each other for a moment. Erik knew Dave was considering killing him right then and there. Then Troy started whining and Dave turned and knocked him to the ground, pointing the fob at Troy's neck instead.

"Lose the mask," Dave said, then blew his whistle and screamed at the course, "All of you! Off the field! Let's go! Lights out early!"

"I can walk them down…" Kate called, approaching. She looked from Dave, to Troy, to Erik. "But weren't you going to do a pop quiz?"

"Just take them down." Dave avoided Erik's gaze and moved toward the course, whistle cutting through the growing dark.

Once everyone had lined up, Kate led them down into the broad field and Erik heard Dave call for Jada through the trees.

"Why's he just calling for Jada?" Erik moved out of line and ran

up, shoulder to shoulder with Kate, who did not look at him. "I thought we were supposed to be using the *buddy system*. I thought—"

"I'll go get her," Javier said, flanking Kate.

"You won't find her," Erik exploded. "*I'm* the tracker, *I'll* go."

"Tell you what," Kate said, her small, shrewd eyes crossing from one boy to the other behind her cat-eye glasses. "You two are the last campers without slash marks on your necks. Whichever one of you tags the other one's throat first can be Signal's buddy."

"Come on, Kate." Javier shook his head. "We're not fighting over a girl, come on now."

"Yeah, seriously, Kate," Erik agreed. "Sorry if you're missing your soap operas out here but that's not happening."

"Not a chance." Javier nodded to him with grateful understanding. "I'll just go get her real quick and bring her back to fire circle."

"No, I'll go. I can find her faster." Erik frowned.

"It's not some hard track. I'll catch up with Jada and ask where they were." Javier reached for his back pocket. "I got this, okay. It's not a problem."

Kate was backing away from them, smiling.

"Yeah, it's not a problem because you're not going. Are you getting your sharpie out right now?" Erik felt around for his own sharpie. Had he lost it on the obstacle course?

"Look, Erik," Javier said patronizingly, red-capped marker flashing in his hand. "I don't have any issues with you, and I don't *want* any issues with you, but you need to stop trying to get Signal alone. She's not like Jada, okay?"

Erik blinked.

"Signal's a *good girl*," Javier went on. "She's not trying to hook up with you, man. You want to mess around? You got Jada for that. But Signal's not the type of girl you mess around with. So, man to man, I'm going to need you to back off."

This was why Javier was attracted to Signal. Not her weird sense of humor, or her unearthly kindness, or even just her body, which Erik could have understood.

No, Javier valued her *virginity*, the least Signal thing about Signal.

"Believe me," Erik's hand closed around his own sharpie, far down in his back pocket, "you have *no idea* what kind of girl she is."

Javier's face went flat. Talking was done. They started side-stepping each other in cold silence.

Javier lunged. Erik stepped back. They circled closer.

Javier lunged again. Erik sidestepped him, then grabbed his collar and came very close to sawing the black sharpie under his ear, but Javier batted him away before breaking into a run.

Erik let out a yell and stalked after him into the dark woods.

Javier's path was easy enough to follow in the long grass. Erik swung himself up the first oak in the vicinity and waited for Javier to double back under him.

But in the dark, a thousand lurid images of Signal rose up and attacked Erik at once.

Erik's subconscious had apparently been hard at work for some time, gathering still frames of her during their days together and stitching these images with the remembered sensation of her pressing against him that first day, after the obstacle course.

The phantom Signal clung even tighter now, nestling into his chest, ghostly eyelashes brushing his throat, leg moving between his. Javier's idiotic accusations had unleashed a succubus who now wholly possessed him. His fingers dug into the branch, and he felt suddenly delirious, feverish with the need to actually feel her. He would kill for the smell of vanilla soap.

This was not good. Oh, this was not good for either of them.

"Hey, what're you doing?!" Jada cried in the distance, and he heard Javier profusely apologizing.

"…last ones left for the Sharpie thing, but he just disappeared…" Javier griped. "…leave Signal back there?"

"Yeah, she has a shovel, but I don't like her being alone…" Funny —the way she said it, Erik believed her. Like she and Signal were friends all of a sudden. How had Signal managed that? "Not with that masked guy hanging around. Could you go check on her?"

"For sure. Where is she?"

"Up by some skinny trees, where the ground is all soft."

The hook up spot! Erik knew exactly where to go. They crossed

below him, and Erik dropped from the oak branch, knocking Javier to the ground.

"You *sneaky piece of shit!*" Javier screamed, throwing him off, back on his feet.

"Go back to the cabin, Jada," Erik said softly.

"Geez, take it easy, you two!" Jada laughed nervously. "It's just a game—"

"I'm going to kill you, you cock-eyed son of a bitch!" Javier threw a punch that, had it connected, would have ended Erik's night. But Erik dodged it, letting his weight shift to his side and sweeping Javier's legs out from under him. Javier lost his balance, and they grappled on the stony ground. When Javier had no distance to swing, Erik's greater upper body strength won out.

"Come on, man," Javier whined, as Erik bit off his sharpie cap and spat it into the grass. "You know you scare her, right? I'm the one she wants to see right now—"

But I'm the one who needs her, Erik thought.

Then, as furious as if Javier had said the words, Erik slid the sharpie across the other young man's throat, then stood and started running toward the birches. But as fast as he ran, he could not escape the refrain:

I need her.

As his evidence. To end the Wylie-Stanton. That was all it was.

She could probably use some water.

Erik stopped by the obstacle course to grab some water bottles and a flashlight before going on to the birches.

Signal stood at the edge of a fresh grave; her figure framed by birches glowing neon blue in the moonlight. Erik slowed his steps, wondering how close he could get before she noticed.

He was just an arm's length away before she swung around, brandishing her shovel.

Her stance was pathetic. A forceful jerk of the handle and he

could've sent her sprawling on the ground, and she still didn't seem to know he was there, whispering frantically to herself: "You're fine, *you're fine*—"

"No, you're not," he snapped, furious at how exposed she was. Left alone with Jada, left alone with Dog Mask in the woods, left alone with *him,* the way he was right now. "You're not even halfway done! What have you been doing out here since Jada came back? Making dirt angels?"

"Erik!" Signal gasped. "You scared me for a second!"

"What else is new?" Erik said bitterly. "Kate asked me to track you down and make sure you hadn't run into Dog Mask." After he won the right to do so in a heated fight, but whatever. "How's it going?"

"Well, hmm. I'll probably just be another, like…fourteen hours?"

"Take a break, weakling."

He traded her the shovel for the water. She drained half a bottle in one pull. She'd needed it, just like he knew she would.

He watched her for a moment, a swinging sensation tilting through him, and clenched his hands around the shovel. The fever from the tree wasn't going away, it was getting worse. He wanted to be tangled up with her again, wanted her under him in the grave, could already feel the cotton of her shirt ripping between his teeth.

Erik turned away and started pitching dirt furiously back into the grave. Prickles of heat rose along his neck, hot chills washing down his back. For the first time he could not say what he was thinking to Signal, and it was his own fault.

But why deny himself? Who was he hurting if he gave up keeping things platonic? He had been constrained by his mom's rule, the need to focus on the case, and the concern that Signal would get too attached. Class As could be obsessive. But these heretofore iron chains suddenly felt like smoke, and the smoke was clearing.

She could obsess a little bit, Erik bargained with himself. *What's the worst she could do? Claim I'm her boyfriend? Fine. Hold hands in broad daylight? Cool, it'd shut Troy up.* He dug harder, but the next thought came anyway: *She can kiss me as much as she wants. I can handle it.*

He could practically hear his mom's removed, clinician's voice: "*Remember your replacements.*"

Almost since Erik's infancy, he had been taught to replace standard emotional vagaries with more specific terms that described psychopathic brain chemistry.

He didn't "like" people, he considered them useful. His "concern" was possession. And if the word "love" ever crossed his mind, he should replace it immediately with "entitlement."

"Everything okay?" Signal called.

"What?" He blinked, torn from his thoughts. "Sorry if I'm not *chatty*, I just think I have a pretty good idea how to put Dave's eye out without him figuring out I did it—"

"Don't!" Signal laughed. "Dave is such a loser, he doesn't deserve an eye patch."

He kept digging, unable to look at her. "It's not a coincidence your mannequin turned up after your stand-off with Kate at Arts and Crafts. They had to make an example out of you. But it's my fault they got the opportunity. We should've buried it where they couldn't find it and use it against you like that."

"That's not your fault. I'm just really bad at camp. Anyway. Who won the screen time?"

"None of us. No dinner either. You really put Dave in a *mood*."

"Wow…I'm sorry."

"Don't be. If we'd done that Scavenger Hunt, camp would've been a dismal place to live." He let himself look at her then.

He'd read online there were flowers that only fully bloomed in moonlight. Her face was one of them. He looked away again.

"And we probably would've done it, if you hadn't refused." He hauled up another shovelful of dirt, voice rough, "So. You remembered something?"

"Yes! Erik, I remembered inside the shed!"

Signal had never entered the shed, the home of her childhood boogeyman, before Rose made her. Rose had promised she'd finally meet Mr. Moody there, but Mr. Moody was running late. Rose had set up a dirty card table as though for a rummage sale, with cups and figurines and cupcakes and the same saw Signal had woken up with. Then Rose had retrieved a thermos from under a floorboard and

pushed Signal to drink whatever the hell was inside it, so she'd be more "fun."

"So, Mr. Moody didn't drug you," he said at last, "Rose did."

Signal tried weakly to deny it, but he pushed. "Even if she wasn't aware the thermos was drugged, she was trying to get you drunk. Why? If she needed something from you, why not ask while you were sober? Especially considering you did everything she told you to—"

"That's not true."

"Yeah, *it is*. You're bending over backwards every week so she can get high with a ghost. Why did you put up with all of it?"

How could you love someone so awful? Unconditionally, the way his mom had loved his brother, Skye. Some people had that gift, to be loved no matter what, no matter what was wrong with them. While others couldn't be loved no matter how hard they tried to fix themselves.

"...Were you in love with her or something?"

"What?! No! Rose was like my sister. It was just . . ." Signal closed her eyes, tucked her fists under her elbows. "Sometimes, in high school, a terrible friend is better than no friends, okay? The article got that right at least. I was a loner." And then she said, louder, "A sad virgin loner 'seemingly obsessed with the macabre.'"

"Signal," Erik said. "Please stop hitting on me."

Her laughter rang out, sweet and sincere, but for the first time it didn't make him smile. Was it *that* funny? She could flirt—he'd heard her with Javier. But she'd never made any sort of move on *him*. Probably too intimidated by his looks, understandably.

As a rule, Erik didn't make the first move. To protect against ever acting like Skye, he let the girls come to him. And they always did. But Signal was so insecure. It might take a little effort on his part to show her he wasn't kidding.

Like, if he walked over to her right now. If he cupped her face with his hand, leaned in, and *gently,* so gently, bit her earlobe.

Signal was still waiting for his response with a look that suggested bated breath. Like he really was Sherlock. Warmth surged through his chest, looking back at her, imagining her collapsing against him.

Tonight, sugar cube, Erik decided, staring into her eyes, *we are done with platonic.*

Erik believed he was incapable of liking or loving, but he knew he valued Signal highly. How was a rational assessment less real than an emotional claim? His objective view of Signal as someone rare and precious was surely more valid than Javier's virginity fetish. Erik would be careful with her, and cheerfully maim anyone who wasn't. Then, after her name was cleared, she could return to her real life. No damage done.

But they should fully process her new memories first. The case, and stuff.

"… Considering what you've remembered about the shed," he cleared his throat, "let's review her possible admirers: there's her churchy boyfriend, his violent best friend, and the local dealer. You see any obvious overlap?"

"Vaughn, Vaughn was Mr. Moody!"

Erik went to get one of the water bottles. Leaning down, he caught her vanilla soap smell and took a big step backward.

"Nope. The guy most likely to stash an old thermos full of liquor in a shed is Jabberwocky Whatshisface. He's our guy."

"Jaw Itznicki?!" Signal was scandalized. "No way. He wasn't Rose's type."

Erik grinned, but watched her carefully as he said, "Bad boys are every girl's type."

"Where do you get your girl information, a T-shirt from 2002?"

"Come on, Signal. How hot was Jaw?" His grin deepened as her eyes cut away from him. "Rate him on a scale of one to me."

Signal rolled her eyes, face flushing. She was at her most expressive when she was trying not to be, and the attraction she was trying to hide now was electrifying. With her, there would be eye contact. He would *insist* on it.

She started rambling nervously, flustered, going off on some tangent about how Jaw used to come do yardwork and sneak cigarettes from the planter. Janeane's cigarettes? It was hard to focus. Here she was, guiltily admitting Rose might have been attracted to Jaw,

blushing just using the word "hickie" around him, and in another fifteen minutes they'd be making out.

Hickies would be perfect. He'd make sure they had matching ones before they returned to the cabin.

"Don't you see?" Signal cried. "One of them hurt her, and they both covered it up. Maybe initially Vaughn thought he could throw off police by leaving her in Jaw's shed. Make it look like an overdose. But when he gets there . . . there I am! The only person who knew about Mr. Moody!"

"So why let you live?" Erik asked. A fair question, but her eyes went dark like he'd flipped a switch.

"So he could frame me instead."

"Framing someone is hard, Signal. A spur-of-the-moment framing? Before I met you, I would've said impossible. Put yourself in the killer's position: You've just killed Rose. Your reflexes are on a hair trigger, the woods are full of your classmates, and then you stumble across the only person alive who can tie you to the victim."

Her jaw sharpened like she was clenching it, hard.

"He'd kill you." Erik put his hand to his heart. "I'm sorry, nothing personal. But you'd be gone. But you're saying, instead, Mr. Moody decides to use his precious getaway time. . .posing Rose in your lap? Planting false evidence? Who even does that?"

"Oh, I don't know," she snapped. "A homicidal maniac, maybe?"

"A homicidal maniac might have the urge to frame you, but they couldn't pull it off. Only a psychopathic mastermind would be capable of that. So if Mr. Moody framed you—"

"If?" Signal was pacing again, but less steadily. "What do you mean, 'if'?! There's no if. He either framed me, or I killed her." She wheeled on him, her voice shaking. "I killed her and then blocked it out! Is that what you're trying to say?"

She's serious. Erik blinked.

After fighting and digging, he was physically exhausted, which didn't happen often, but when it did, he started missing inputs. But unless he was very mistaken, it seemed Signal wasn't sure whether she'd killed Rose or not.

The beam from the flashlight, balanced in the crook of the tree,

didn't illuminate her face. He needed to see her expression. He turned and took the flashlight from the branch.

"That's what the prosecution thought. And the jury too." He trained the beam on her face, drawing out his voice to sound almost accusatory, trying to probe this impossible suspicion. "No evidence anyone else had been in the shed. You were found soaked in her blood, the weapon in your hand. No thermos was found. No drugs in your bloodstream. The only evidence we have Mr. Moody even existed is that Rose told you he did. And she lied to everyone…"

Signal stared at him defiantly through the bleaching haze of the flashlight, and he saw it.

This was what was haunting her. *This* was the ghost in the doll.

As long as Signal wasn't sure what had happened that night, she refused to rule out the possibility she had killed Rose.

It was a possibility someone like her could not survive.

He cut the light away. But the reverse image of her floated in the blackness between them, her sorrowful, struggling face burned into his retinas.

"But I don't buy it," he went on earnestly.

"Why not?" Signal's voice reached through the dark.

"Call it instinct. I see the angel and I want to set her free."

There was a long, agonized moment of silence. He could sense the heavy separation falling between them but didn't know how to stop it.

"You're not guilty, alright?" he cried. "Juries can be wrong. I wouldn't bother going over this crime if I thought you'd committed it. You understand that, right?"

Silence, like she had left, though he could see her figure as his eyes adjusted to the moonlight again. Her eyes were wormholes and he wondered if she'd even heard his last statement.

"So, Watson." He tried desperately to lighten the mood, but could feel it not working, his words shattering against her silence like glass against a wall. Still, he kept throwing. "Here's the questions we need to ask to solve this crime: Why did Rose keep Jaw such a huge secret? Why did she need to get you drunk? And who drugged the thermos?"

Silence.

"Any thoughts?"

"No." Signal's voice at last, cold. "Look, I can take it from here. You can go back to camp."

"Uh, *what?* Why?"

"Maybe because you just stuck a flashlight in my face and interrogated me?"

"Yeah? And? I wanted to see your face." *I always want to see your face.* "I told you. Everything comes through in your expressions."

"How stupid do you think I am? This whole time you've just been trying to get in my head!"

"Oh. Okay. I see." Erik's blistered hand fisted around the shovel. "I'm out here burying *your* mannequin, trying to *help* with *your* wrongful conviction, and you still think I'm just some creeper out to get you, right?"

Wasn't he, though? He'd been plotting his move, all right. But not the way she thought. She thought he was trying to *kill her.* He had fought every day to protect her. A knot of confusion pulled tight in his chest.

"I'm sorry, Signal, but if you'll let me just make myself a little vulnerable here, you're starting to hurt my feelings."

"Come on, Erik," Signal said, "we both know you don't have feelings."

The knot ripped apart and he waited to collapse. This could only be a heart attack.

"You were right," Erik's mother's voice said. *"She* is *perceptive."*

Pain radiated through him, sharper with each breath, but he was still standing. Erik turned and started tamping down the dirt over the mannequin's grave, cold sweat beading his face. If this wasn't sudden cardiac arrest, then what the hell was happening? How was it humanly possible, to be this hurt by some words?

The replacement for hurt was "narcissistic injury."

He'd thought Signal trusted him. *More than that, be honest.*

Erik had thought she liked him. He'd expected her to make a cringeworthy confession and offer a swooning first kiss. He had been ready to *be her boyfriend*. But no. She wanted nothing to do with him. With *him!*

How could he have misread her so badly? He had watched her so carefully, but she always managed to surprise him. He was rattled to

his core by the coldness surfacing now. But shock was a rational reaction, not an emotional one. There was no precedent for this. Girls *always* liked him. Whether he wanted them to or not. Until the Girl from Hell.

Because she was scared? How scared could she be if she asked him to meet her after lights out? She didn't mind his eye, she never had. What the hell was her problem? Someone else? What, she'd rather be hanging out with a guy who *flattened skulls with his bare hands?*

"You know those scars on Javier's knuckles?" Erik kicked dried leaves across the finished grave. "He tore them open on his victim's skull. Javier banged his victim's head on an asphalt drive so many times they had to identify the dude with dental records *after they picked his teeth out of the pavement*. You should ask him to tell you about it the next time you're mooning over each other in a dandelion patch."

He should have figured out a mode. Why the hell had he been himself? Because it was honest? A stupid, arrogant move. What was the point of being honest when no one believed him, even his own mother? Signal would be the first and last girl to have known—and rejected!—the real him. Whatever. He didn't need her. He didn't need anyone.

Erik grabbed up the shovels and flashlight and headed back toward the shed, but when he heard her hurrying to catch up, he slowed down. At least she still saw him as marginally less threatening than Dog Mask. Until Dog Mask drew a daisy in blood on his shirt or some shit.

And she still hadn't said anything!

"Your silence speaks volumes, by the way," Erik snapped, halfway across the obstacle course field.

"There's a reason I didn't want to do the Scavenger Hunt today, Erik. I'm trying not to judge everyone by their past. Only by how they act here and now."

"Except for me. Everyone gets a fresh start except mean old Erik."

"You've been calling me a weakling and telling me I don't belong since I got here!"

"Yeah, and I'm right!" Erik said with his whole heart. "Maybe that's what *really* bothers you about me. I don't pretend either of us is

something we're not. I don't ask you to make me daisy chains in a meadow or tell you you're a flower. I'm just myself with you, *terrifying though I may be*, because I trust you can handle it. But you can't. You're *determined* to think the worst of me!"

"Erik—" Signal looked at him then, in utter disbelief. "You killed ten people!"

"And you haven't even asked my side of the story!"

"Erik!!"

"I asked you, at least." His face was burning, and since Kate was in sight, he sped up enough to leave her behind.

Erik was standing at the bottom of the grave. He was covered in what felt like pitch—thick and sticky and setting fast into his skin—and the mysterious pain in his chest was eating away at him. He stared up at the moon from the cold box of the grave, and then the tips of her angel wings crested over its edge. They kept rising above him, two perfect swan wings, impossibly high—they must have extended ten feet above her head before her blue halo finally appeared. She shone too bright for him to look at directly, but he knew if he did her eyes would be entirely white and pitiless.

"I love you," Erik called to her.

Signal stared down at him without answering.

"Is it obvious?" he asked.

"Erik," Signal said sadly, "what is that all over you?"

He leant against the cold soil wall and sank his fingers into it. He could climb up the dirt, it was packed hard enough.

"Come closer," he said, trying to hide the growl in his voice, as he hoisted himself up, "and I'll tell you."

The angel Signal knelt, her searchlight gaze filling the grave with blinding light.

"What are you covered in, Erik?" she asked again.

He reached up, seized her. *"Blood."*

Her white eyes went wide as he dragged her down. She beat her

wings furiously, glowing white feathers raining down on the black dirt as he pulled her on top of him. She wanted away, but he was too strong. He clutched her to her chest, to the pain, as though her light could heal it. She collapsed against him as she had on the obstacle course, but it was hollow, helpless: her light was flickering wildly, searchlight eyes sputtering out, disconnected.

And then her head fell back, her eyes went black, and she *screamed*.

Erik sat bolt upright in his bunk, the dream evaporating, but Signal was still screaming. All around the cabin, lanterns were snapping on. Nobody staggered groggily across the room and grabbed Signal's shoulder.

Signal was curled up like a fist, face distended, sweaty blue hair plastered across her forehead.

"ROSE!" Signal sobbed. "*ROSE!!!*"

This is my fault, Erik thought.

He'd brought more memories up to the surface, then hadn't talked her down enough from them. He shouldn't have ended the conversation with a fight, should have taken better care of her. Her screams made him contract with actual pain. Not imagined, not mirroring, a true pain like things inside him were ripping and tearing.

The others were circling her bunk, Javier to the front. When Javier took her hand, he saw Signal clock the scars on his knuckles. Then she looked up at him, and her hand tightened defiantly on Javier's.

He wished it was around his throat.

"Wait a second…is it raining?" Dennis asked, and the cabin went still until they could all hear the drumming on the roof, and a low groan of coming thunder.

Perfect, an excuse.

Erik jerked his sleeping bag and pillow from his bunk and threw them on the floor across from Signal. He lay down heavily, watching her. Watching for some sign she was alright.

That they were alright, that there was a "they" anymore.

Signal got up and walked away with Javier, hand in hand.

Erik did not like Javier, but he did not dislike Javier enough to murder him. Yet part of his brain started planning how. Erik caged his head in his arms, squeezed his eyes against the dark panic overtaking

him, a physical alarm as loud as if he were in freefall. The panic made about as much sense as the angel nightmare. Saying he loved her in the dream, his "jealousy" now, none of it was real. His brain *did not manufacture those chemicals*.

"Why do you think that?" Lupin had asked Erik, his last summer at Higher Paths. She had held him back after the night's fire circle had ended disastrously, three different girls bursting into angry tears after Erik calmly explained he'd happily sleep with all of them but could never like any of them. "That you can't feel love?"

"Because my mother, who is a Stanford professor and works profiling criminals for the FBI, told me so? You talk to her every weekend, so this really shouldn't be surprising."

"We mostly talk about her and your grandfather," Lupin said after a beat. "And I know I'm not a Stanford professor, but I've worked with hundreds of kids throughout my career. Including some psychopaths. And you're…not like them, Erik."

"First off, my camp name is Honeysuckle. And secondly, there is a lot of variation between individual psychopaths."

"I've seen you be kind," Lupin said. "Not tonight. But I've seen it."

"Because my mom has dedicated her life to teaching me mechanisms that counter my instincts."

"Or …" Lupin's face was neutral, but she didn't blink as she watched him through the fire. "She misdiagnosed you in the first place."

Erik shook his head, exasperated. Why would any mom want to believe her kid couldn't love her?

"Have you heard the phrase 'you spot it you got it'?" Lupin asked.

"It *must* be good psychology if it rhymes," Erik snapped.

"It's a phrase that refers to the ironic monitoring process theory, or IMP," Lupin continued, unruffled. "The idea is, the things we are in the most denial about in ourselves, we see in everyone else."

The fire crackled between them.

"I really don't see how that applies." Erik shrugged.

"People don't like to change." Lupin went on. "Because it's

painful. The mind finds any reason to avoid pain. The more painful the change, the more urgent and truer those reasons will seem."

"People don't change at all," Erik said. "We're walking countdown clocks that set off pre-determined bursts of chemicals that decide all our choices."

"If you believe that, then what are you doing here?"

Erik shrugged. "Getting some fresh air."

Lupin let the fire burn for a long moment.

"In my experience," she went on wearily, "people can change. But only when there is something they want that they can't get any other way."

"I don't know if you were listening at fire circle," Erik smiled, "but I get more validation than I can take just the way I am, thanks."

"Sex isn't love, Erik." Lupin frowned. "And I see you work hard, every session since you started with us. You are trying to change, and I know who you're trying to change for. And I ask myself, what is it that Erik wants, that he needs, that he's not getting?"

"Sleep." Erik stood and yawned. "Can I go to bed now, or what?"

And he'd left. Not just the fire circle, but Higher Paths.

His parents picked him up at the next wilderness station after he faked convincing symptoms of appendicitis. On the ride home, he'd negotiated a deal: He could skip the rest of camp if he started helping his parents with their new algorithm project.

Now, at Naramauke, he was being physically exhausted and underfed. Months of clinical drugs were re-entering his system as he burned through body fat. That accounted for the bizarre dreams and these surges of "emotion." These weren't real feelings; these were chemical reactions. He wasn't hurt, he was hungry. He needed something to eat, and he needed a reason not to sleep.

Because he couldn't take any more dreams.

And thanks to Dog Mask, he got that reason.

Fighting Dog Mask. Preparing Dog Mask's large body for disposal. Carrying that enormous corpse down to the lake and then rowing it out in the canoe. Learning that Signal and Nobody had had the world's most amicable break up. Putting the canoes back, which didn't seem to even occur to Kurt or Javier. It all felt like one long blur until he found himself walking behind Nobody and Signal and heard Nobody say:

"You like Erik. It's obvious."

"It is?" he said, needing her to turn around.

And when they did, Signal's face was perfect. Her horrified expression, mouth falling open and closed uncertainly, eyes rapidly blinking. Whatever she said next would be a lie.

"I don't. Like you. At all. *At all.*"

Yes, you damn well do. Erik smiled.

But she was denying it. Trying to protect herself from caring about someone who couldn't return her feelings.

Injustice burned in Erik. Not because she was wrong, but because she was right. His heart was stone, true. He would never love anyone, sure. But he had been completely honest with her. And she'd just lied to his face! She'd gaslit him about her feelings, made him doubt his instincts, sacrificed a possible connection to what—to play it safe?

If she was too cowardly to admit what she wanted, he would make her beg for it.

I'm going to make you love me, Erik vowed, full of cold delight at the thought. *Desperately. With all your heart, no matter what. Even if it ruins everything. Even if it destroys your life. Even if it rips your heart out.*

But he only said, casually, "Yeah, well, you would if I wanted you to. Like me." And the last part, like it was an afterthought, "Love me, even."

Signal swallowed with some difficulty. "Not a chance."

"Desperately." His smile deepened. "It'd take, hmmm…three weeks? A month, tops."

"Right." She quailed.

"And after all those accusations of me getting into your head about Rose, a Signal with a crush on me sounds like a way more fun person to hang out with—"

"Um, I have never believed you could actually get in anyone's head, to be clear—"

"Then this is the perfect way to prove it. Three weeks." Three days, more likely. But the first step was lulling her into a sense of complacency. The gloves were off from this point on; there was too much to lose. "Starting from today. I'll make you fall in love with me if it's the last thing I do."

"Um, literally impossible." She laughed way too loud.

Laughing right back at her, he put his hand on her slight shoulder; her eyes flared helplessly in response. He asked with perfect sincerity, "Do you even know how beautiful your eyes are?"

"I know you're joking," Signal blushed, "but just FYI, I'm about to start a new relationship with Javier, so I just *can't* with the compliments. Even sarcastic ones."

Erik's smile dissolved.

What the hell was she talking about?

He'd been with one or both of them the entire night, except for when they were cleaning up the body. So what, between wrapping up Dog Mask's body and shifting it from the pool of his dark arterial blood, Extremely Normal Person Javier had made his move on Signal?

And she'd gone for it?

What the hell was wrong with her?!

SKREEE BOOM

And then every thought and calculation went out of Erik's head as he grabbed Signal's hand and got her away from the explosion as fast as he could.

Kate tried to claim a water boiler had exploded, like they didn't scream their way through cold showers every day. Then she admitted they should flee for their lives up to the obstacle course. Everyone except Erik, Javier, and Dave, of course, who could risk getting exploded to secure snacks from the main cabin.

"With me, boys." Dave snapped his fingers in Erik's face. Erik sent one last furtive glance in Signal's direction.

She was already staring back at him. When their eyes caught, his heart skipped like he'd slipped off a hold on a ropes course. Then her head jerked down, like his look had stung her. Signal turned, slipping her arm through Nobody's, and they walked with Jada up the hill.

As Dave got the rig of generator and hotspot that allowed him and Kate to go online, Erik cleared out the pantry. He was dumping graham crackers, cookies, and whole cans of Hershey syrup into his trash bag when Javier came in.

"Bring some real food, man," Javier said, pulling the new bag of marshmallows out of Erik's bag and putting it back on the shelf. "Not everybody likes candy all the time."

"Everybody likes marshmallows." Erik snatched the bag back.

"Well, I don't know if she likes them or not, but Signal can't eat them. Because of the gelatin. What else have we got—"

Erik stared down at the package, a penny dropping with a hollow clatter at the base of his stomach.

That was why Signal didn't take the marshmallow from him on the swing. She was a vegetarian, and gelatin was made from the hooves of cows. Cows that had already been slaughtered for meat, that weren't even directly killed for the marshmallows themselves. But that cold thing in her would rather go hungry than condone such a thing.

And Erik had killed ten people. He was the marshmallow.

Signal wasn't holding back out of fear. He just wasn't good enough.

Even if Signal wanted him, even if she knew he wanted her, she would never let herself accept him.

He could picture his mother as clearly as if she were standing in the room. Could hear the words, exactly as she'd said them, the night he finally came back from Ledrick's clinic.

"You are not your modes, Erik. Or your looks. Or your intelligence. You are *what you do.* You are what you *have done*. And there is no going back and fixing that, for any of us."

He looked up at Javier, and Javier drew back slightly.

"You told her you were innocent," Erik said. "Didn't you."

Javier's lip curled in disgust. "Not that it's any of your damn business, but no. I just don't go running around bragging about how many kills I have and trading them for clout, acting like a body count is an accomplishment—"

"Because you're hiding what you are," Erik finished. "Maybe you've even convinced yourself you didn't do anything wrong—"

"I ended a life," Javier cried, stabbing at his own chest with one rigid finger, hard enough to bruise. "I grieve that, every day. I made an unforgivable mistake and I have never denied it. Because that's the only way I can be better. Knowing where I'm starting from is the only way I can change. Whereas *you*—" Contempt choked Javier's voice, made his nostrils twitch like he'd smelled something rank. "You're just a killer. You don't care who has to die if *you* get what you want."

"Javier, what the hell are you talking about?" Erik shook his head. "Change how? You're at *assassin camp*. You're learning how to *kill more people*—"

"Because we take out the bad guys!" Javier insisted. He really believed it, Erik could tell. "The ones the law can't reach!"

Erik laughed in his face. "Bad according to who?!"

"Not you, you don't even believe in good and bad, right?" Javier shot back. "But the rest of us got this thing called a soul, that lets us feel when something is *messed up*. That's how Signal *figured you out*. And you can't stand that you can't fool her—"

"Boys!" Dave strode into the small pantry, clapping sharply in their faces. "Knock it off! Knock it off and listen up because I'm only going to say this once."

He gestured very loosely with his fob as he spoke.

"You don't want anything to do with any girl at this camp. I promise you. You guys think you're so *tough* with all the grab ass and mustard fights." His eyes flashed between them, his overly tanned face sagging wearily. "You don't know what suffering is. The *years* of twisted games the feminine mind is capable of makes physical torture seem like a sweet relief."

Erik couldn't contain his surprised laugh, but Dave did not smile.

"You think I'm kidding? I'm trying to *save your life.* One day, if you

are very, *very,* lucky, you will get down on your knees and thank the other guy for taking her off your hands. That's a guarantee."

"Or you can just thank me now." Javier smiled at Erik.

"Alright. Enough. Erik, you shower in Kate's room. Javier, you shower in my ensuite. Let's go."

Javier, still smiling, half-danced out of the room as Dave's whistle filled the small space. Dave rolled his eyes, then stabbed the air in front of Erik's face.

"Bullet. Dodged. Believe it."

Once they got up to the obstacle course, the girls had been sent to shower. Erik helped sweep the climbing walls, scanning the struts for ticking boxes and choking on the injustice of the morning.

Signal was projecting her own innocence onto Javier, because she was trapped in a murder machine, incapable of taking a human life, and Javier was *just so nice*.

But even if he took her by the hand down to the nurse's office and made her read Javier's rap sheet out loud, it wouldn't change what he, Erik, had done.

Giddy chatter rang through the trees. The girls, walking back up from the main cabin were loudly debating who had the stupidest outfit culled from the camp's old lost and found. Signal had obviously won, in a Big Dogs shirt and tight red pants, and when she locked eyes with him across the field she smiled and called out excitedly. He couldn't quite hear what, but he laughed, just to be in the moment with her.

Then Javier cut between them.

Javier took Signal's hands and told her to spin around. After a beat's hesitation she did, confused. Javier looked her up and down, turning the outfit she'd been proud of a moment before into something that made her go awkward and red. Then Javier pulled Signal into him and kissed her too hard, face digging into hers.

A personal hell opened in Erik's chest and swallowed him.

Signal wobbled back from the kiss, delicate chin scraped by stubble, and ducked her head submissively as Troy whistled.

The back of Erik's throat burned with glow stick green bile as he hid in the shadow of the obstacle course.

"*You and Javi?!*" Jada screeched as Erik soundlessly retched into the grass. *"Whaaaat?!?! That's so cuuute!!!"*

Soft footfalls approached. Erik whipped around, to be met with Dennis's quiet face and outstretched hand.

"Hey." Dennis offered him a bag of Ruffles. "Hungry?"

Erik grabbed them wordlessly.

"Need anything else?" Dennis asked as the chips vanished.

"A way out of this godforsaken hell hole," Erik said hoarsely.

"Funny you should mention that. I just learned Kate is turning off the fence tonight—just overnight," Dennis amended. "Not even eight hours, closer to five, and the range for the kill switches is military grade so—"

"Wait." Erik held up a shaking hand. "I'm still a little keyed up from this morning. Explain this like I'm Dave."

Dennis spent their lunch laying it out: Kate was turning the fence off so if more explosions happened, they could evacuate. The fence would be off for a six-hour window.

Because the fence had a range of twenty miles, if Erik could get hold of a vehicle and drive far enough away, he'd be free from camp until they physically tracked down his switch, and he could evade them for days, weeks even, until he got back to NorCal and killed Ledrick. Cut through the red tape, end camp the easy way. Ownership of the Wylie-Stanton would revert to Skye, who was Erik's conservator after his parents' deaths. He'd swing down to Pacifica and kill him too, why not.

Made more sense than sitting around here, watching Signal and Javier "date."

They were across the field, but her laughter kept crowding him. He could not unsee her face this morning, the way she blushed when she declared she didn't like him. She liked him all right, could have loved him if they'd met at a different time. But there was no changing his past. Enough playing around at this high school dating shit. He

didn't know how to love; he knew how to kill. That was what he was for.

Once he was sure Javier was asleep, Erik threaded through the sleeping bags to where he and Signal lay.

The stars were bright enough his shadow cut between them. Erik was surprised at the prim margin of space between their sleeping bags. He would've zipped the bags together. Slept with his face against her neck and his hand over her heart.

I'll never see you again, Erik thought. *A shame.*

It wasn't like he could miss her. Or worry what might happen once he was gone. The replacement for concern was possession, that was all it was. He was too possessive, this wasn't news.

Yet wasn't he giving her up?

Could you give up something that was never yours?

But Signal *was* his. His perfect opposite, his emotional flashlight, his puzzle to solve.

His past was a graveyard, there was no changing that. But if he solved her case, if he came up with an alternate theory that saved her from camp and ended the Wylie-Stanton—she could accept her feelings for him then, if he seemed good enough. He could bend the cold thing inside her. Spark a riot in that haunted little heart of hers, force all her forbidden feelings out. Win his bet, after all.

Because that was still what he wanted. More than killing Ledrick. More than anything. He wanted Signal to love him with all her heart.

And this was the last moment her heart was still in reach.

"Signal," Erik said out loud, "come with me."

Erik turned his back as Signal rose—unsure what he was doing, thinking fast, and walking faster across the windy field—and then raced up the fire escape of the obstacle course, a plan surfacing all at once, because he'd subconsciously been considering it all along.

At the top of the fake apartment building, he scanned for the lights of the remote cabin.

"Erik—" Signal was breathless from chasing after him, her voice annoyingly coy. "If this is about—"

He cut her off. "Dennis told me something interesting. Kate is taking down the fence tonight in case we have to make a run for it. Just until dawn."

"So what," Signal's voice wobbled, "you're going to run away?"

Oh, Weakling, Erik stared at her through the dark, *I am going to tear your heart out.*

Javier's girlfriend wanted to hang out as much as he did, surprise, surprise. Her eagerness was *embarrassing*. She started nodding even before he finished the offer, and he felt his weariness dissolving, though he'd had no sleep and little to eat since lunch. And before they'd even left the field, she flirtatiously referenced the bet from this morning.

"Calling me names is not going to make me fall in love with you."

"What?" Erik blinked innocently. "In love with me? What are you talking about?"

She palpably squirmed. "Remember? Before the bomb went off?"

"Oh, right." Erik artfully let his confusion clear, as if this had finally clicked. "When I made that *joke*." Her squirming deepened; it was precious. "Sorry if I got your hopes up there, Signal, but I wouldn't dream of intruding between you and Javier. What you've got going is so healthy, so *real*. He gets to play at being high school sweethearts and you get to pretend you can change a *cold-blooded murderer*—" He watched her closely then.

Her haunted eyes went wide, her voice indignant. "We're not pretending anything. We're both broken people. I know you see me as some sweet little weakling, but I've got my share of regrets to carry, believe me."

"Yeah, I can only imagine how many flavors of lip gloss you used to shoplift." He kept staring, his spirits rising. "Have you told him you're innocent yet?"

A beat, then, "It hasn't come up."

He grinned to himself. Of course, it hadn't. She and Javier barely knew each other. Javier couldn't know Signal at all if he didn't know about Rose. She was refusing to look too closely at the

first guy who openly pursued her, and Javier was hyped about sex with someone who had no standard of comparison. Romance at its finest!

"Well, the good news is I don't actually care," Erik went on casually. "I'm sure it's all very exciting, but as an onlooker you two bore me to tears. I'd much rather ask more questions about Rose…*if I'm allowed*."

"Actually, would it be alright if we talked about you for a little while? You know things about me I've never told anyone else, and I don't even know your last name."

The back of his neck prickled. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"You don't have to answer anything you don't want to. But we only ever talk about me. I'd like to know more about you."

This was what was so infuriating about Signal. She actually *wanted answers* to these questions. She cared, and she listened, and she remembered and that made him chatty. And when Erik got chatty, he scared people.

"Like, who were you in high school? Did you play sports? Were you in all AP classes? Backpack or messenger bag?"

If he were in a mode, he'd appropriate Skye's high school experience. Even without bending the truth too much, he could frame something aspirational: all the parties he went to, all the hot girls who approached him. But it'd become a habit, to tell her exactly what he was thinking. He was just never quite prepared for how sad his thoughts were when he heard them out loud.

"I never went to high school. I was pulled out in sixth grade and home schooled."

"Oh. Was your mom, like, a stay-at-home mom or something?"

"She was a forensic psychologist."

"And your dad?"

"A computer programmer."

"Why did they home school you?"

"They didn't want me to hurt a classmate and end up in prison."

He heard the shiver up her back in the word. "…Oh."

"Am I creeping you out again?"

"A little, yeah. That's quite a statement, Erik. You want to give it some context?"

"Context, context . . . When I was thirteen, I attacked an emotionally abusive narcissist who deserved it. He was over twenty at the time, so it's not like it wasn't an even match. And face stitches look cool! I still don't see what the big deal was. But I was informed that I lack in empathy. So my mom pulled me out of school and tried to fix me."

"Fix you how?"

"Oh, she tried everything. Medications. Music. Aromatherapy. 'Incentivizing kindness,' that was a big one." How had she gotten him to this place? Spilling his guts about his parents, feeling as though she'd peeled his skin back and the wind was landing, cold and hard, on raw nerves. "Lots of reading. I am definitely the type who spent his weekends at the library."

The hope in her voice was almost too much when she asked, "Did it work?"

Erik's mother had had their housekeeper take him to Ledrick's outpatient facility the day he slashed his brother's face; he didn't even get to shower—he signed in at the front desk with his hands all bloody.

He didn't see his mother until almost two months later, when she showed up unannounced and reeking of cigarette smoke. She'd had a matron sit between them, like she thought he might attack her, and stood to go long before the visiting hour was up.

"I miss you," he'd confessed, as she was turning for the door.

"Replacements, Erik," she'd reminded him, and the door closed.

But he didn't remember the replacement for homesickness. Even the standard word didn't seem right, wasn't strong enough.

Erik had snuck over to Ledrick's office. He'd worn down a plastic knife into the shape of the office key, which he'd found on the janitor's ring and traced in the middle of the night the week before. So, when his mom sat down with Ledrick to follow up on their visit, he was

pressed against the cold cinderblock wall of Ledrick's office bathroom, listening.

"I can't take him yet," his mom announced. "I'll pay whatever you need."

"Can you give me a rough estimate of how long he'll be here?" Ledrick asked.

"I don't know." She sighed wearily. "I've been at the hospital every day with Skye for weeks. A lot depends on how this next surgery goes. He's almost out of grafting material. Luckily, I'm a good match, so…" He heard her cigarette lighter flick, a deep inhale. "I'm looking for alternatives. Military school refused. Boarding schools take one look at his permanent record and laugh in my face. And I'm tired, alright? Most nights it's all I can do to just get the wine open."

"I'm sure it's hard, Monica."

"What's *hard* is that I *always knew* something like this would happen. But I thought he would lash out at me! To lash out at *my son*…I could have taken anything, anything but this. And now everything he knows about my father, he's trying to pin on Skye, as—an excuse. An excuse! If I had to come home to that thing every night, laughing behind that goddamn eye...I would lose my mind, alright?"

A neutral pause, then, "Visits with you, Monica, are the only incentive I have for him. He really thinks he loves you—"

"He's *wrong*," Erik's mother snapped. "He's never loved me, or anyone else. He can't! I've known that since he was a newborn. And I have *done my best*, you know I have. But how do you love someone who can't love you back? Who destroys your life? Who *rips your heart out?!*"

His mother's words lapsed into tears again. Ledrick promised in hushed tones they would figure something out.

Erik was backed against the cold cinderblock wall, both hands over his mouth so they wouldn't hear him crying. Mirroring his mom, of course. His tears weren't real. And he was grateful. Because if his heart could work, it would have broken him completely.

"Well, no," Erik told Signal. "Obviously."

The cabin was easy to get into. The family inside, with one small exception, fast asleep. In the dim, cozy basement, Erik showed Signal Armchair.org on a kid's tablet, and watched her scroll through the familiar board with a sense of surreality. It was like he'd thought about her so hard, for so long, that he had willed her to his side.

They found a video from Mike that shook her to her core. He revealed he had run off with Vaughn, his longtime secret boyfriend, to New York City. Two of Signal's main suspects no longer had a motive to kill Rose.

She spent a long time reading an article about a pentagram necklace that Rose's stepdad had found in the house. He'd apparently told Rose that Signal and her pagan beliefs were no longer welcome under his roof. And this had happened just before Rose invited Signal into the cabin, to meet up with Mr. Moody.

Just seeing the site brought back memories of his frenzied days of research, little details he should ask her about: Was it true Tom was addicted to painkillers? There could have been a drug connection to Jaw. Was Janeane as concerned about Rose's dating life, or just Tom?

Signal was looking up Jaw's last known address when the lights came on.

Getting out of the basement in a hurry was fun. She called his name, struggling to keep up, and from the moment his arm went around her, his favorite song would not stop looping in his head. Like a booming soundtrack that filled the woods as they ran through it, life instantly more cinematic than any movie. Because it was happening, and he was the hero. And every time he helped her over a log or pulled her out of the way of a branch, he could practically hear the audience cheering.

I like it when she leans on me, Erik thought.

It was the access to her body. She was pressed against him, and he kept cinching her closer, wondering each time if she would push him away. But her fingers dug in, like no matter how close he got, she wanted him closer. It sent a chemical reaction through him roughly equivalent to free falling, but upwards. Flying? Sure. Whatever it was, it was taking the place of sex as the second-best thing after climbing.

Once the creek was behind them, he had to withdraw his arm, or

it would have been weird. Still buzzing, he shot forward another several yards, leapt up, and tagged a low-hanging branch, feeling like he'd made some kind of touchdown.

He turned back to see her bent double.

"You have *zero* stamina," Erik laughed. "That was three quarters of a mile, not even, and I carried you for most of it." The imprint of her was still tingling up and down his side.

"I never had…a pentagram…necklace," Signal panted. "But Jaw…you were…right, Jaw…was Mr. Moody…after all." She let her hair fall in front of her face for a moment, then wrenched herself up to standing. "Only thing that fits."

"But you said he had no motive. So, what's his motive?"

"Like what your website said. Some kind of ritualistic murder."

"If there was going to be a sacrifice that night, why wouldn't it be you? And not just because you're the virgin—"

"*Obviously*, it should have been me." Signal was disappearing from her eyes again. "The only person who would've missed me is my mom! And even my mom would've been better off with me dead—"

This was more than honesty. This was self-loathing.

Signal hates herself, Erik realized. Which made no sense! Unless…

If Signal truly believed she might have killed Rose, that explained her lack of self-preservation. The cold thing inside her, that denied her feelings for him, that made her turn down marshmallows when she was starving, the cold thing wasn't sure she deserved to be alive.

And if he didn't find proof that she was innocent, it would destroy her.

Erik was holding her slight shoulders before he realized he had walked over to her, searching for some light in her wormhole eyes.

"*You never say that again. Ever*," Erik told her. "Listen to me, Signal. We're going to clear your name and get you out of camp, I *promise you*—"

And then they heard the helicopter.

Signal wound her arm through his again, neither of them acknowledging how close they were holding each other and ran for the obstacle course.

They arrived just in time to watch the Director kill Troy.

From the moment Troy fell to his knees, Erik adopted a totally neutral affect toward Signal. He willed himself not to think of her, marshaled his gaze away. He would not let Ledrick see that she was valuable to him.

But Signal was perfectly capable of getting the Director's attention all by herself, trading missions with Nobody and getting herself the most dangerous target possible.

And the morning they were sent out, while they were packing up the cars after their mission makeovers, Dennis pulled him aside.

"I just talked with Signal," Dennis whispered, "and I'm a little worried."

Erik blinked, caught off guard by Dennis' wild emotionality. Signal had won an ally in Nobody, had nurtured a friendship with her mortal enemy Jada, and had Javier wrapped around her little finger. But Dennis fretting about her was perhaps her biggest coup yet. No one could ever accuse Signal of being charming, but she'd somehow won all of them over.

"Why?" Erik said. "What's she planning?"

"I really can't talk about it here." His eyes flashed in the direction of Dave and Ledrick. "But I'm going to be online almost constantly for my mission. You can reach me at skullsex.com, so if you can get online, I'd like your thoughts."

Erik nodded, then hurried toward the line of cars warming up in the chilly lavender morning. He was about to go directly to Signal when Dr. Ledrick stepped in front of him.

"Erik. A word."

Dr. Ledrick's face was pale pink, his dark eyes deathly flat and expressionless. His fob was firmly in his hand, thumb lightly resting in the kill button. Dr. Ledrick walked Erik over to the matte black lowrider he and Jada were taking on their mission.

"I just wanted to say," Dr. Ledrick began, "how proud I am of you, Erik."

Erik started counting down from one hundred.

"I know we've had our ups and downs. But you have exceeded my expectations at every turn. At last, you're going out into the world, and doing what you were always meant to do. Your mother—"

Erik could feel his face heat but refused to let it form an expression.

"Monica wanted the best for you. But sometimes wanting 'the best' means imposing what *we think* is best, rather than supporting the direction someone is meant to grow. You are a rare young man, Erik. I don't think she ever appreciated how rare. If Mozart's father had been deaf, he might not have let him practice quite so much piano, you know? And if Monica had had her way, you'd probably still be in a basement in Pacifica, memorizing your replacements."

Fifty, Erik counted, *Forty-nine, forty-eight…*

"After this mission, my hope is you will begin to *appreciate* yourself. That you will see the truly rational among us operate outside the superstitious constructs of good and evil. And you, Erik, are perfectly rational. Which is the highest compliment I can give a fellow human being."

Erik said, "You know I'm going to kill you, right?"

Dr. Ledrick let out a short laugh and stepped back reflexively, hand tightening on his fob.

Erik turned and got in the car, slamming the door, and hiding his face from Jada with his pillow. He felt feverishly ill, the kind of sick where you lay in bed with every blanket on you and still shudder with cold.

"I see you, girl!" Jada was mumbling, doing a double thumbs up to the car in front of them. "Chill out, Signal."

Signal.

He sat bolt upright, as Jada hit the accelerator and their lowrider purred forward. Signal was his proof the Director was wrong.

And his proof was in danger.

"We need to go somewhere with internet access," Erik said hoarsely, and Jada sucked her teeth. Her nose and eyes were slightly swollen from crying.

"Uh, I'll see what I can do but we're like, fifty miles out from the nearest gas station. One thing at a time!"

Erik coolly pulled the map from the console and started examining their route.

The Nestle Inn did not have internet. But the La Quinta across the freeway would.

Erik stood on the concrete divider in the middle of the eight-lane highway, the dark veiling his figure from the traffic streaming in either direction. The cars and trucks were going upwards of eighty miles an hour. He waited for a ten-count pause and then ran across the four remaining lanes, down the scrubby ravine, and across the flat land between the highway and the soaring LaQuinta sign.

Inside there were two people on front desk, a guy with a weird tuft of beard just below his lower lip and a young woman who he kept flashing his phone at.

"Enough, Gary! That's nasty!" she snapped, as Erik slipped behind one of the business center flatscreen monitors and pulled up Skullsex.com.

It redirected to a rudimentary message board that pulsed with glitches, a mirror of a mirror of a dark web site. He entered his email in exchange for an account name.

HAPPYCAMPER001:

Dennis?

While he waited for a response, he dug around for Jaw's address and checked Girl from Hell case updates on Armchair.org. But he didn't have to wait long:

DUNGEONMASTERD:

Hey. Thanks for checking in.

HAPPYCAMPER001:

what's going on with Signal?

DUNGEONMASTERD:

she asked me if I could turn off a kill switch remotely. Like I turned off the pacemaker.

HAPPYCAMPER001:

and you told her no

DUNGEONMASTERD:

I told her yes. Because it's possible. But I told her if I mess up, whoever's kill switch it was would die.

A shiver ran down Erik's back like he'd only felt once before in his life as he read:

DUNGEONMASTERD:

So she asked me to try hers. Do hers first and then I can jailbreak everyone else.

HAPPYCAMPER001:

don't do it

DUNGEONMASTERD:

It's too late. She's planning on crossing her line the day before she has to face her target. So if I don't try, she still dies.

A hand landed on Erik's shoulder. He whipped around to see the guy with the soul patch.

"Excuse me, but this business center is for guests only. May I see your room key?"

"I didn't bring it with me. My mom's just going to let me back into the room," Erik said, in little brother mode. "When I get done with my homework."

"What room number?"

"I don't remember, two something," Erik turned back to the computer.

"I'm going to need y—"

Erik brought his elbow back straight into the guy's balls. He didn't turn around as the hefty guy hit the floor behind him and let out a nauseated wheeze of pain. Instead, he leaned forward and typed:

HAPPYCAMPER001:

Will you be able to turn it off?

DUNGEONMASTERD:

There are some variables in play that make me nervous.

DUNGEONMASTERD:

There's about a ninety-four percent probability I could.

DUNGEONMASTERD:

Here is my concern.

DUNGEONMASTERD:

Is it possible Signal would rather die than kill somebody else. And so this is just her way of killing herself?

Erik rocked forward, clutching at his hair, wishing the clerk would get to his feet so he could punch him again. Anything, anything to distract him. That cold thing in Signal would absolutely demand she take her own life before she took a stranger's. He had to figure out some way to stop her. *Now.*

"Hey, uh—"

Erik looked up to see the other front desk worker, the young woman. Soul patch guy was gone, and she was struggling not to break into nervous laughter.

"I just wanted to tell you that my manager is in the back talking about calling the police. I don't know what words were exchanged between you two, but he's *real* upset about you using the business center—"

Erik smiled sheepishly, and the girl couldn't help smiling back. "Oh wow, I don't know, I sort of asked him not to look over my shoulder at an email my girlfriend had sent. He was just like, hovering—"

Recognition clicked in the young woman's eyes. "I'm so sorry about that."

"It's not *your* fault!" Erik smiled, nice young man from a nice family mode. "I have this homework thing I'm trying to get done,

that's like ninety percent of my grade, but I don't want to cause problems…"

"He'll be off at midnight." The young woman dropped her voice. "If you want to come back then."

"I appreciate it, thank you." Erik closed the message window and stood, melting the front desk worker with another smile. "And sorry if I caused any trouble. Guess I'll see you later?"

She smiled knowingly, and he turned and strode out of the lobby.

His own smile fell the moment he was back out in the dark. Any drivers that caught him in their headlights as he crossed the highway would have taken him for a much older man.

Back in their hotel room, Jada was balled up under the scratchy duvet of one of the two queen-sized beds, sobbing to the distant applause of the motel TV. Erik closed the door gently. If she was pretending to sleep, he didn't want to interrupt. He shucked his shoes off and climbed on top of the other bed, his heart racing.

A persistent notion kept trying to worm out of his subconscious and he was fighting desperately to keep it from becoming a full thought.

Erik forced himself to consider that Signal was almost certainly having sex with Javier tonight. That she hadn't bothered saying goodbye to him before they left camp.

Was he seriously considering risking his life for someone he barely knew?

Well, there it was, he'd thought it.

Erik shut his eyes and commanded his brain to turn off.

They were back in the woods, running arm in arm. And with that peculiar certainty that belongs to dreams, they both knew once they crossed the fence her name would be cleared, the Wylie-Stanton would be ended.

"And we can just go home," Signal sighed in his ear.

These imagined words pushed the dopamine level of Erik's

dreaming brain past its threshold. Though he would never know it, a tear crawled down his face and seeped into his hotel pillow, the first time he had cried since that day in Ledrick's bathroom.

And while in real life he had practically carried Signal, in the dream he was leaning on her until, with a jolt, he fell to the ground.

Erik stood, brushing what he thought was pine needles and acorn caps off his clothes, turning slowly in a circle. The branches creaked overhead, night birds staring down with ravenous eyes. There was no sign of her anywhere. Signal was gone.

A thick, dimly glowing mist descended on the forest then, creeping along the ground as though it was searching for something. With the same dreamlike certainty, he knew it no longer mattered how fast he ran, or in what direction. There was no way out of the woods, no finish line to cross. Without Signal, there was no way out. The mist came closer and its glow revealed the ground was covered, not in dirt and stones, but rotting flesh: broken teeth, and torn-out fingernails.

He belonged to the woods as much as the corpses he walked on. All that was left for him was to wander this dark prison until his share of material joined the ground.

Erik woke up with a strangled gasp. His shirt was soaked with sweat, but he didn't stop to change. He yanked his shoes on and hurried out into the buzzing exterior hall of their second-floor room. He raced down the cement stairs and through the yellow pools of motion light across the parking lot, back through the rocky waste down to the highway, and stood, panting, by the cement divider guarding the first lane.

Erik glared, bleary-eyed, at the eight lanes of traffic, assessing the growing headlights by the coming motors, a mechanical ocean tide. Then, he took a deep breath and broke into a sprint.

Darting past an eighteen-wheeler, he vaulted over the median and ran full tilt across the last four lanes, the final car cutting so close it tagged the bottom button of his flannel, flying out behind him, with its side view mirror. The plastic circle went pinging a quarter mile down the road in the opposite direction.

Erik didn't notice.

He slid down the rocky side of the ravine and ran through a city

block of scrub and found himself, sweating and shaking, back in the LaQuinta business center again.

HAPPYCAMPER001:

Try mine first.

HAPPYCAMPER001:

My kill switch

HAPPYCAMPER001:

Try mine before you try Signal's

Erik had been sitting in front of the screen for nineteen minutes waiting for an answer. Dennis was probably asleep. He was out of nails to bite, but he couldn't stop chewing at them.

Then, three dots pulsed under his message.

DUNGEONMASTERD:

you're not serious

DUNGEONMASTERD:

That's a bad idea

HAPPYCAMPER001:

it's the best one I've got

HAPPYCAMPER001:

please

HAPPYCAMPER001:

we do our target tomorrow night but we should be back before sun up

DUNGEONMASTERD:

you can't be serious

HAPPYCAMPER001:

I am telling you this is what I want. Can you do it.

DUNGEONMASTERD:

If you're giving me all night that should be more than enough time. But even if I go slow and am as careful as I can possibly be, it's still a huge risk.

HAPPYCAMPER001:

Oh come on now. 94 percent that's like an A-

DUNGEONMASTERD:

lol that's not how probabilities work

DUNGEONMASTERD:

There is a non-insignificant chance that when dawn comes you will die from your kill switch going off and it will be my fault

HAPPYCAMPER001:

no I won't. You'll set me free, then you can free Signal like you planned

DUNGEONMASTERD:

Erik

DUNGEONMASTERD:

you're sure about this

HAPPYCAMPER001:

100 percent

On the way back to the highway, Erik stopped, and vomited in the sand. Then he continued calmly back to the motel, where he fell into a deep and dreamless sleep.

"Where did you go last night?" Jada asked.

They were eating coffee and donuts on the hood of the lowrider, down the block from the underground Portland venue their target ran.

"I had to talk to Dennis about something," Erik said, staring down

at his powdered jelly. His first choice of a last meal, the sweetest food in reach. "Did I wake you up?"

"Nah." She shook her head. "I can't sleep. Every time I close my eyes, I see Troy." She swallowed, the corners of her mouth crumpling a little. "When his eyes went all red."

Not exactly what he wanted to picture right now.

"We should probably get in there. The headliners go up at ten," Erik said. He finished his coffee, crumpled the cup, and slid off the hood. He rolled his neck and cracked his knuckles as they walked toward the narrow, industrial punk house where the show was happening. He was keyed up because every moment he was fighting down a large and vital part of himself that wanted to back out. Erik had zero desire to risk his life. He figured his odds of actually going through with it were pretty low. But he was curious how long he could hold out, how long he could play chicken with the coming dawn.

Because if he could go through with it, if he could wrestle himself across the line between night and day, Erik had a dreamlike certainty it would gain him a soul.

But first, they had to kill the owner of this bar.

The inside of the warehouse was a mess. Unmade mattresses flopped down against one wall, a ramshackle cash-only bar slapped together against the other, the black-painted walls tagged with every conceivable color, the floor sticky with weeks of spilled beer.

Past the bar, the warehouse opened up into a vast, darkened space described by thousands of strings of multicolored fairy lights; a three-dimensional glow-in-the-dark Jackson Pollack painting spattered up all the way to its rafters.

The headlining band was playing at the far end of the warehouse. They were simply not to Erik's taste, but he nodded along like a fan as he and Jada cased the crowd for the target.

Jada elbowed him. He followed the lift of her chin to a VIP

section behind them, a wooden platform with a black La-Z-Boy chair surrounded by hangers-on.

A woman not much taller than Jada was enthroned there, her scalp circled by a scorpion tattoo, blurred by the stubble of her crew cut. She carried herself like she had been very beautiful once, and when her eyes fixed on Erik, he knew she had killed more people than he had met in his life.

"Shit," Erik said softly to Jada, who nodded in recognition.

"Shit is right. Any ideas?"

The target was older, her friends were young. She was sober, they were drunk. She didn't have security. Her clothes were baggy enough to conceal a weapon. They just had to hope they weren't.

Erik ducked and half-shouted : "After the show, if we grab some of the gear, she's most likely the one who'll chase us. If we lead her down an alley, we can corner her."

Jada nodded, but her teeth dug into her lip. "I feel bad. Like, I like her tattoo."

He nodded. Not much they could do about it now, but Erik didn't want to kill the target either. He couldn't deny the primal rush of winning a life and death encounter, but he had always been forced into them. He'd hoped some predatory instinct would kick in. But all he felt was repugnance at the unprovoked violence ahead.

The band was finally getting offstage, threads of feedback tearing through the speakers. Then the Christmas lights started to blink rapidly around them, the walls leaping in and out of existence, letting the crowd know it was time to exit.

"Look—" Jada elbowed Erik again. The target had moved into the crowd and was now thirty feet away, hugging a younger girl with dyed-red bangs.

Erik obligingly threw an arm around Jada. She turned and tilted her face toward his, stopping a centimeter short of making contact, so they would look like they were drunkenly making out while eavesdropping.

"Hey! You made it!" The target smiled at the girl. "You found a ride down from Seattle?"

"Caught a freighter." A knowing beat. "What?"

"Scarlet. Hopping trains is dangerous—"

A sharp laugh. "I was with a bunch of guys who catch out all the time, okay. I had plenty of help."

Erik clocked where she nodded—a group of guys in dirty clothes with dark circles under their eyes and spectacularly unwashed hair.

"How long are you in Portland?"

"I was hoping I could stay here?" The girl gave her a nervous smile.

"This is actually a really bad time for guests. Even the band isn't flopping tonight."

"Oh." The girl was trying hard not to sound hurt.

"Last call!" the bartender screamed.

"Here." The target wound a bracelet around the girl's wrist. "Drinks on me, okay? We'll talk in the morning."

The girl moved back toward the circle of guys, throwing back her shoulders and skipping the last step, determined to brush off her hurt. The target watched her go, then turned and looked directly at Erik. Then, she walked over to the large, sliding warehouse doors between them and the crowd at the bar, and started pulling them closed.

The back exit of the warehouse was still open. The band was loading their stuff into a van parked outside. Erik led Jada toward the backdoor. The speakers and amps belonged to the venue; he was sizing up which one he could most feasibly run with when the target crossed past them and called to the band, "You can leave the rest of it for tomorrow if you want."

"You sure it'll be safe?"

"Oh yeah." The target tilted her head back. "Everyone around here knows not to play with me." Her eyes flashed to Erik again, and now she was pulling the back door shut. Suddenly, it was just the three of them under a galaxy of Christmas lights.

Jada reached for Erik's hand. She pressed the smooth handle of a switchblade into his palm, and he felt a pulse of gratitude. But then, as the target turned from the door, he saw how her pants sagged on one side. Her hands were floating toward the weight, and in another instant the gun was out in the open between them.

He hadn't seen a gun up close before. He'd had a security

guard fire at him when he tried to escape the asylum, but he'd been facing away, it had been all sound. Seeing one was strange because he couldn't convince himself it wasn't a prop. But as the black hole of its barrel lined up with his heart, he had one clear thought.

We should have said goodbye.

But the gun continued upwards, the target not breaking eye contact as her mouth opened, her stare already flat.

The report tore everything in two.

Erik and Jada stumbled to the back door, fumbling with the lock before spilling out into the alley. They didn't talk, wouldn't have been able to hear each other if they had. They just raced along the damp alley and around the block, back to the car.

"We're screwed!" Jada sobbed, voice too loud, like she was trying to hear herself over the ringing in her ears, hands shaking on the wheel. "Someone is gonna call the cops, you know someone is gonna call the cops, that was so loud!"

"Just drive," Erik said.

"We can only go a mile away!"

"So, look for an overpass." Erik twisted in his seat, then pointed. "Over there, turn left and backtrack a bit, there's a trestle bridge."

Under its shadow, Erik dialed "Momanddad" while Jada cracked open the driver's side door and quietly threw up. Distant sirens rode the cold air into the cab as the Director finally answered. He wasn't much help, just telling them to return along their route.

Erik drove, since Jada was shaking too hard. He turned the car back toward the hotel and pulled into the back corner of the parking lot, under the shadow of a yew tree, when they arrived.

"Why are we back *here?*" Jada sniffed. "We already checked out. We need to get back to camp as fast as we can."

"I'm not going back to camp. Dennis is going to try to turn off my switch at dawn."

"What?" She blinked at him, stunned. "What am I supposed to tell Dave and Kate?"

"Tell them you woke up and I was gone."

She crossed her arms. "Well, you're not taking the car. Don't even think about it."

He rolled his eyes. "No, I'm not taking the car. It's too easy for camp to track."

"Oh, don't worry, they'll find you, car, or no car. This is *stupid*, Erik, this is the worst idea I ever heard—"

"I don't have a choice," Erik said. "There's someone outside of camp who needs my help and I have to go see her."

"'Her,' huh?" Jada gave him an arch look. "So, you *did* have a girlfriend this whole time."

"She's not my girlfriend."

"Right, right. Just a girl you're ready to die for."

"It's not like that. She's just someone who can help me out. If I help her first."

"And how're you s'posed to help her if you're *dead*, Einstein? You really think even if Dennis can get your switch off, camp can't just turn it back on—"

"That's where you come in," Erik said quietly. "I was hoping you could cut it out of me before I go."

Jada blinked at him.

Erik stared out at the dirty yellow streetlights past the highway. "Obviously, it's in a place with a lot of arteries so—"

"I've seen inside of a neck before," Jada cut him off. Erik couldn't help smiling.

"So, will you help me get it out," he cleared his throat, "if I'm still alive at dawn?"

"*Geez*…" Jada shook her head, eyes glittering. "Look, not going to lie, I am NOT going to miss having you at camp. You were kind of an ass to me, okay?" Jada cut him a hard look. "But if the Director finds out I helped you, he'll *kill me*. Straight up."

"I'll cut it out myself, then."

"How!" Jada laughed, incredulous. "That area's not easy. Especially when you can't see it!"

Erik let his head fall back against the headrest, silently fuming. There was nothing in this world worse than needing people, except for needing girls you'd dumped.

"So, screw me, right?" he said flatly.

"I'm not saying I won't help. I just need you to swear on your life that you won't tell anyone. Don't go run tell Dennis I cut it out, or even that it's out at all, because, duh, he'll know it was me. And if you run into Signal—"

Her gaze held his without blinking, and his stomach flipped over.

"*When* you run into Signal," she said slower, "you don't tell her either. Promise. You don't tell *anyone* that I helped. Ever." She swallowed. "Promise?"

"I promise," Erik said solemnly. "I won't tell anyone that you helped me."

The cold silence drifted between them as she considered.

"I'll want some collateral. Some dirt on you. So, you *really* won't tell." She glared. "Tell me for real. How did you know about my stepbrother? *Really*. Did— were you ever…"

She didn't know how to ask. He didn't know how to answer.

"I have an older brother," Erik said at last, "not a stepbrother, a full brother, but he…he hates me, I think that's fair to say. Skye hates me. But it's very important to him to…be in control of me. Not the way your stepbrother controlled you. But in his mind, I belong to him, and he can do whatever he wants to me, and I—" His brow furrowed. "When I grew up, it was always like…it felt, every day, like 'the call was coming from inside the house,' if that makes any sense." He flashed a look at her.

Her body was rigid, her hands in fists.

"Like the only boundary I had against him was my own skin. And I didn't even really have that." He shrugged, his face too warm. "He was more interested in beating me up, but when we went to school, and I went to visit him…" Erik's words stuck in his throat.

She would probably just laugh; there was no comparing it to what she'd been through.

And it had only happened that one time. On that visit to Skye's school, to his frat, that summer he was thirteen.

There had been a party. Skye had slipped Erik cups of coke that tasted too sweet and then very bitter. And a girl all the frat brothers called "the spare mattress" cornered Erik in the basement when he was out of it.

She had been tripled in his vision, looming over him with pale pink glossy lips and pieces of white chewed food between her teeth. And when she grabbed his head and put her tongue in his mouth, he tasted her vomit.

"Shh, it's okay, it's okay," she'd slurred when he tried to get away. "They told me to take care of you."

Skye had walked past the door then. Erik had seen a phone camera flash, multiple voices bursting into malicious laughter:

"Robbing the cradle, Kelly, damn!"

"Hey—" By a miracle, Erik had fought upright and stumbled after his brother, the room tilting wildly as he felt his way into the hall. "Hey, Skye, I feel sick—"

"Get back in there!" Skye herded him back toward the basement. "She wants you, man! Go crazy, you won't scare her."

"I don't like her!" Erik had pleaded.

"You don't like anyone, dumbass. Now get back in there before she sobers up and notices your eye!"

He'd shoved Erik backwards through the door as his friends laughed, then slammed it in his face. Erik braced himself against it, unable to stand under his own power. The girl behind him had his other arm, was pulling him back to the couch. He had been scrawnier back then, but after what happened, he made a point of getting stronger.

The rest of that night lived under a tight mental lid he never lifted. He had done an excellent job of not thinking about it, until the file box arrived at the asylum shortly after his parents' funeral, from his mother's office.

Inside a folder marked "PROOF" was a double-sided checklist, filled with factors used to diagnose psychopathy, and boxes next to them waiting to be ticked off.

"Early sexual activity" and "promiscuity" had been ticked, age 13 written in the margin.

How else would she have known unless Skye told her?

"I would've done exactly what you did to your stepbrother," Erik's voice was deep and stiff, "if I had even managed to survive that long. I know we didn't work out the way you wanted. But I respect the hell out of you, Jada. For getting yourself out of that alive. I think you're a hero."

Jada wiped at her cheeks, her curls trembling, her face completely still.

"Damn it, Erik," she sighed at last. "You had to go and make it so now I *will* miss having you back at camp, even if you *are* an ass. I wish we'd talked instead of kissing, now I know you hate it or whatever—"

"It's not that I *hate it*, I just don't *get it*. It's…*irrational* to rub the germiest part of any two animals together." He winced and amended, "It requires an emotional element I don't have."

"Yeah, it's called a soul." Jada rolled her eyes, but her tone was not unkind, and after a beat she added, "Look, kisses or no kisses, you're risking it all for someone you care about. I get it, okay, I'm the same thing."

"Oh?" He tilted his head back. "What thing would that be?"

"A romantic." She smiled sadly. "So fine. I'll cut your switch out at dawn. But I think we got a couple hours till then, and I'm, like, exhausted—"

"I'll watch out for police while you sleep." He opened the passenger door and felt her relief.

"Really?"

"Yeah. I'm not sleeping any time soon."

Erik straddled the highest branch of the yew and stared out across the highway at the blue La Quinta sign. He could still climb down. Cross to the business center. Tell Dennis to forget it.

If he died tonight for her, she would never know it. Might not even care if she did—why should she? They'd never even kissed. Zero exchanged germs.

And then something clicked.

Erik's hands balled into fists against the branch he was straddling, and a beam of light shot through his thoughts, illuminating everything.

The shed Rose had been murdered in was Jaw's hook up spot. That's how Rose knew where the party thermos was—she had been there before. Even if Jaw hadn't met the girls in the shed that night, his DNA should have been all over the place. His DNA and everyone else he hooked up with.

The fact there had been no evidence of anyone else just proved someone had done some serious clean up. Signal had been framed, impeccably. But Signal wasn't even supposed to be there that night. She had had a last-minute invite from Rose to meet Mr. Moody. Who was definitely Jaw, because of the pentagram necklace and the fact that he lived at the trailer park, close to the shed.

Had the killer meant for Jaw to take the fall? They must have if they had materials to clean up at hand. If they knew where the thermos was, they had been in the shed with Jaw, who was the town drug dealer.

Wasn't Tom addicted to painkillers? And couldn't make his prescriptions last the month? If he was buying drugs from Jaw, he'd know all about the shed. And that kind of compartmentalization—big time church guy, secretly hooked on pills—was classic Nice Guy behavior.

Tom was also weirdly controlling with Rose, telling her who she could date and see as a friend. Intrusive, too, otherwise why would she put the lock on her door?

So, if Tom found out Rose *was* sleeping with Jaw…yeah, he could see it. Tom killing Rose and framing Jaw for it.

How had Signal not thought of this?

Erik stared at the blue La Quinta sign. He had a fully formed alternate theory now. He had gotten everything he needed from Signal. Sherlock, as usual, had solved the case. Why did Sherlock even keep Watson around? When did Sherlock ever need Watson?

Always, Erik thought. *Because Watson solves Sherlock.*

Sherlock only makes sense because of Watson explaining his

thought process to the reader. Sherlock would be a warped, solipsistic junkie if Watson wasn't so interested in figuring him out. No story without Watson. No hero.

Everyone needs a Watson, Erik thought, *someone who wants to solve you.*

He turned his eyes away from the La Quinta sign and up at the stars, which seemed very bright and close. The sound of the leaves rustling around him was like the rush of the tide back in his old room.

He wanted Signal to love him, with all her heart, no matter what. Not because he'd fooled her, but because of who he truly was. The kind of guy who would stay up in the tree until dawn, alternate theory and all.

But no one could have been more shocked than Erik that this *was* who he truly was.

What's the replacement for this? Erik asked his mom in his head, shivering hard. *Not self-interest. Not possessiveness. Not entitlement. How am I doing this, how am I still in this tree, if I am what you always said?*

But his mother's voice was silent.

Erik leaned back against the trunk, still shivering, and watched the dark thin. He watched the stars tremble out of existence as the birds saluted the dawn. The sky went pale pink at its edge. He was breathing hard, hard as though he were running, as the worst night of his life ended.

"Self-transcendence," Erik said quietly. He *had* had that one. All along.

A single ring from his phone: Dennis was done. Erik collapsed forward on the branch, then burst out laughing.

"Hey!" The car door slammed below him. "You still alive up there?" Jada called, a silver flash in her hands.

"Don't sound so disappointed," Erik called back.

Jada drove to a CVS right at the edge of her mile limit. There she bought him a sewing kit, gauze, disinfectant, and protein bars. He had nothing to deaden the pain when Jada cut him, took out the

switch, and stitched it back up again. He just clenched his fists. Luckily, she was quick.

Once the wound was dressed, Erik hid his switch in the car so it would look like he was still with her if they turned it back on. Then he stepped out into the CVS parking lot and saluted her as the lowrider hovered at the edge of the parking lot, waiting for a break in traffic.

Jada blew him a kiss, and he laughed, and then she was gone.

The knot of kids watched him from the shadow of a parked freighter at the edge of the railyard. As Erik approached, the group fell silent. He kept his eyes on the girl with the red bangs.

"What's up, brother?" one of the guys called.

"Just trying to catch out. But I could go down the line if you want," Erik said. The new slang was awkward in his mouth, but they nodded. The girl with red bangs had eyes swollen from crying, and she scanned him suspiciously.

"Weren't you at the show the other night?" she yelled.

Had there been footage of them? It wouldn't have been pulled this quickly. But maybe she had seen them running down the alley after the sound of the gun shot. If so, he needed her on his side immediately.

"Yeah." He thought of the suicide hotline he worked, one guy who'd called in heartbroken over his girlfriend. Erik forced his voice deeper, as though trying to hide that he was about to start crying. "I was there with my girlfriend. Or ex-girlfriend, I should say. She just broke up with me."

"Oh, wow, I'm sorry," the girl said. "Yeah, I think I saw her."

"Wouldn't even give me a ride home," Erik went on, blinking fast to fight back imaginary tears. "It was a great show, but I'll always remember last night as the worst night of my life," he said, and she sighed.

"…I know what you mean," the girl with red hair said.

"And I'm broke, so I figured I'd hop a train home." Erik reached

toward the back of his neck but stopped before he made contact with the bandage. The wound hurt so badly it seemed impossible they couldn't tell it was there. "But I've never done it before."

"I'll show you," the girl said, already warming to him. "We'll all help."

Climbing skills translated beautifully to hopping trains: the upper arm strength, the grip he'd built up, his ability to gauge distances. But under the joy of a new physical challenge, a mental clock was ticking down to when Signal crossed her kill switch line.

She would be fine. That was the whole point of Dennis trying his first, to make sure it worked. Unless Dennis was so tired from last night that he slept in. Erik had no way to call him; he'd left his phone in Jada's car, certain that camp would track it. The rank mist from his nightmare closed the back of his throat even as he smiled and chatted with the others.

At Port Hueneme, they helped him choose the best possible jump off, a soft landing that still knocked the breath out of him.

When Erik got to his feet, the air smelled like the beach. Soon, he was on foot alongside the highway, organizing his plan of attack: He would stop at Jaw's house to ask some direct questions. Then he'd find the hotel Javier and Signal were booked at and present Signal with the alternate theory needed to clear her name. Then her heart would break open, her feelings would overwhelm her, and she would be his forever.

Or not.

He put his odds at fifty-fifty.

Erik hitched a ride out of a gas station with a Marine and got dropped off three blocks down from Jaw's house. He was staggering

toward it, dizzy and sore, when a flash of gold caught the sunlight, a small figure climbing over the balcony rail before ducking inside the house.

Hadn't Signal dyed her hair dark blonde before her mission?

Erik dropped his backpack into some ice plants and started running.

His lungs were raw and his arms heavy, mind foggy from lost blood and sleep. He imagined collapsing half a block behind Jaw's house and missing Signal by a few moments. He ran faster.

Erik threw himself up the rough fence and caught the slim iron bars of the balcony, blinds rattling as he dove through the balcony door. Quick steps down the hall, on carpet, behind a door. It had to be her.

The bedroom door shrieked as he threw himself toward the steps he'd just heard, and then a girl with gold-dyed hair and haunted doll eyes leapt out at him. She held a large hunting knife like it was an ice-cream scoop.

"There she is!" Erik grinned, at the edge of a manic laugh. "Nice knife!"

"Erik?!" Signal cried, and threw herself into his arms.

There she was, huddled right where she fit. Only this time it wasn't the action of a prey animal. No, she held him close, sinking against him in relief. Had anyone ever been relieved to see him? Not that he could remember. There was a strange heat just behind his eyes, a sharp bite of salt at the back of his throat. His brain raced to absorb it all: the warm flutter of her breath, the pressure of her arms, the longed-for smell of vanilla soap.

When she stepped away, his hands still clutched her sleeves, not ready to let her go. He scanned her carefully; she was all in one piece. Bright-eyed and smiling, her expression so happy he knew immediately she hadn't cut the switch out yet.

"You don't know how glad I am to see you!" Signal cried. Then: "How are you here right now?"

Huh.

He couldn't tell her about having Dennis try his kill switch first. She might take it the wrong way, like he was, like, violently in love

with her or something. The real explanation required too much context, and they needed to get searching while the house was empty. He deflected again, "How are *you* here? How far are we from Ojai?"

"It's surprisingly close," she lied.

Signal *wasn't* going to tell him all their kill switches were about to be turned off and propose they run off into the sunset together?

A shame, Erik thought, refusing to let his expression change.

But since she was concealing the fact that her switch was off, he felt less guilty about not telling her his had been cut out earlier that morning. Just in case he needed to excuse himself.

Then he started taking in Jaw's room.

One glance confirmed Jaw was not the psychopathic genius they were after.

"No one who puts Scotch tape on fresh paint has the foresight to stage a murder scene." Erik tapped a knuckle on the wall.

But Signal would not be dissuaded. She threw herself into searching the place with the enthusiasm of a meth addict. Erik's first move would've been to check under the mattress, but Signal instead got herself locked out of the computer and then started dusting Jaw's bookshelves. Maybe he was distracting her. She kept glancing over at Erik like she couldn't believe he was really there.

Whenever their eyes met, both of them would smile at the same time, like they had some secret inside joke that would be killed by further explanation.

You missed me. Erik smiled helplessly. *How can such a perceptive person be so clueless about their own feelings?*

"I remembered Jaw being inside the shed," Signal said. "And why Rose wanted me to meet him."

"Well?" Erik moved closer, until he could smell vanilla soap again.

She looked down. "She wanted a picture of me and Jaw doing something. For the My Life thing."

"When did you remember this?!"

A blush was crawling up her neck—not the pretty kind, a blotchy painful red of real embarrassment—when she said: "At camp. When I had that nightmare."

"The nightmare that made you wake up screaming?" Erik cried. "A picture of you and Jaw doing *what* exactly?"

"Kissing." Signal's eyes darted away. "Well, I mean, I don't know how much kissing I was doing. I was mostly passed out."

Did everyone go through something like this? Get some piece of their soul casually chipped off by an ugly world? And she was getting redder, like *she* was embarrassed, like *she'd* done something wrong.

"So Jaw assaulted you. Oh. *Okay*." Erik looked around for something cherished. By the door was a $2400 speaker—perfect. He put his foot through it, the pain of the crumpling metal satisfying. He would do it to Jaw's face if he ever got the chance.

"Erik!"

"Whoops," Erik said hoarsely. "You were saying?"

"Rose asked him to," Signal said, a little too loud.

When Tom found the necklace, Rose had immediately gone to Signal and staged a photo of her and Jaw kissing. Why? What purpose did that serve?

His initial theory was that Tom had killed Rose out of jealousy when he learned she and Jaw were together. And the picture could have been an attempt to convince him otherwise: Rose proving that it was Signal and Jaw together. But that didn't connect to the necklace.

Tom objected to the pentagram, and assumed it belonged to edgy goth Signal.

But the necklace had belonged to Wiccan devotee *Jaw*. Tom was wrong.

And someone else, inside Rose's house, had to know Jaw well enough that they knew where the thermos was. That Jaw hooked up in that shed. And that that was his necklace. There was only one person that picture could be for.

Rose's mom, Janeane.

How did Signal not see it? Maybe he could lead her to the realization if he dropped some hints. Erik started spelling it out for her, but she didn't seem to be listening. She was too busy looking in the wrong places for all the evidence Jaw was supposedly hoarding.

"What does that tell you, Signal?" he pushed.

Signal was trying hard to pull a giant cardboard record box onto

her head from the top of Jaw's closet. He moved in to help and felt her startle. Her cheeks went pink as he set the box down for her. Then he sat heavily on Jaw's bed and watched her pull the lid off of twenty pounds of old vinyl. She kept staring at it, face oddly stiff, as though waiting for her blush to fade before she could look at him again.

"Signal. Look at me," Erik said.

"You're seriously trying that again?" Signal snapped. "Trying to get into my head by 'proving' I killed Rose?"

What?

Why did she talk like this? Like he was trying to *get* her?

Okay, he was, but not the way she feared.

Trying to hook up with someone is *a lot like trying to murder them*.

Was *that* the issue? When he'd been platonic with Signal, she hadn't seemed threatened by him. But when he'd started flirting at the grave, the accusations started flying. She was insecure enough that it could have never crossed her mind that he just…well, "liked" her, in the standard terminology.

Or, deep down, she believed if she liked him back, that proved she was a killer too.

If she was his proof there was goodness in him, then he was her proof there was evil in her. Maybe even enough evil to kill Rose.

That's why she couldn't like him. The cold part of her was constantly calculating: Could she have done it? Was she a murderer? Eat one marshmallow, you're no longer a vegetarian. Like one serial killer, maybe you're not that innocent. She did not understand she was good all the way through.

But he did. And he could prove it.

"Okay," Erik began, "let's just play into your paranoid fantasies about me for a minute. Let's say *I am* trying to get into your head by proving you killed Rose."

The light in her eyes wobbled, a flame in a draft.

"If you know you didn't kill her, there's no way for that to work. I can't prove what isn't true. Don't you want the truth?"

"Yes," Signal said, lifting her chin. "I do."

Erik leaned in, and a shudder went through Signal, as though he

were a vampire about to go for her throat, and he brought his voice into its most hypnotic register.

"Signal, it's time to face some facts. Rose never left the shed. She died in front of you. You remembered her drugging you. You remembered Jaw in the shed. You remembered her taking a picture of the two of you. If we had longer, you would remember her dying, too."

Her eyes edged with tears but did not break their stare.

"But the next morning there was no evidence of anyone but the two of you in the shed. No picture of Jaw. No thermos. No drugs. So what does that tell you, Signal?"

She bowed her head.

"What does that tell you, Signal?"

"I'm a Class A, aren't I? Team Take." Her voice broke, and the pain that shot through him was so intimately connected to hers, it was beautiful. "I would never consciously hurt Rose. But not all of me was conscious… Part of me was awake. And angry at her. And sick of being used. So when she had Jaw kiss me…" Her whole body was clenched, bracing for his confirmation as she forced out the last part, slightly louder than everything else: "That's what 'fits,' isn't it? After he left, that part of me took control. That's what you're saying, right?"

"No." Erik took her shaking hand in both of his. "Signal, I've known you didn't kill Rose from the moment I met you."

"…How?"

"Call it instinct. Or attention to detail. But I know it the same way I know you never had brothers or a serious boyfriend…" The gibe made her focus on him again, got him a glimpse of her puzzled, pre-laugh frown. "Because you clearly have no idea how to search a guy's room."

He stood and lifted the mattress, and the lunchbox that matched the thermos from the shed was just beneath it.

Signal had been right: Jaw was hoarding evidence. Tucked neatly in the lunchbox were the figurines, a security box key, and a

necklace. Erik sat against the bed, an arm's length from her, the inside of his knee just grazing the outside of hers, sending a low buzz of electricity through his bones. They fished through the trinkets that would clear her name like kids sorting Halloween candy.

"Erik…" Signal sighed once he finished explaining his revelation from the tree. She looked from the lunchbox to his face like he had performed a miracle. Like no one had ever looked at him before. Like he was her hero.

She was hanging on his every word, so he made them count: "You got caught up in this mess, not because you're evil or crazy, but because Rose knew she could count on you, because you're the most stupidly selfless and kind person I've ever met."

Signal blinked at him.

"W-what?"

And then the front door opened. Erik made sure she had the key and necklace, and they ran out of Jaw's house.

Signal's car was parked close. They grabbed his backpack along the way and got on the road, speeding back to the hotel, where Javier was waiting.

Probably pissing his pants over the coming mission.

"When is that going down?" Erik asked casually, rolling down the window and letting the wind cool the feverish pain still radiating from where his kill switch had been.

"Tonight."

"Fun stuff." Erik yawned and stretched and felt Signal struggle not to watch. "So, are you going back to help Javier, or just heading out into the sunset, now your kill switch is off?"

Signal went full g-g-ghosts at him. "How did you know my kill switch was turned off?!"

"Dennis told me."

"I can't believe it! When would he have even—"

"Before we left, he told me to visit the old Skullsex.com. It redirected to some weird proxy message board. We've been keeping up. So he did it? Turned off your switch?" She nodded, and he pushed: *"So now what?"*

"Well, the plan was for Dennis to turn off *everyone else's* kill switch too, which I'm hoping he has. Once I know that, I'll tell Javier we don't have to do the mission, and then…"

The knot level with his heart was back. "Then you'll both ride off into the sunset."

She didn't deny it. Just frowned at the road.

"After risking your neck for him with your little kill switch plan," Erik went on, trying to sound casual and failing. "I can't believe he didn't make any effort to stop you."

"He didn't know. I told Dennis not to tell him."

"And why's that?"

"I was afraid he'd stop me," Signal said primly.

"So, he's controlling? He doesn't respect your autonomy?"

"No! No, that's not it at all! He just cares about me too much."

Erik burst out in bitter laughter. Low on blood sugar, low on blood, low on hope.

"Oh right. Tenderhearted Javier. The man who feels too much. Did he ever get around to describing how he caved that one guy's head in?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, he did," Signal huffed, lips compressing. "He told me all about it."

"And?"

"It sounded like a one-off psychotic break brought on by overwhelming circumstances."

"Whoa ho ho, are you excusing the murder of a fellow human being? Someone's been a bad influence on you, Signal."

"Javier's not a bad influence. As a matter of fact, he's bent over backwards to keep me from having to kill someone. He's doing everything he can to protect my innocence."

"Wow," Erik sneered. "Wait, hold on, so you're like, proud he sees you as utterly useless?"

Signal's knuckles tightened on the wheel, shoulders squaring for a

fight. "I'm not useless just because I don't want to kill people. There's different ways to be useful."

"Not in this situation." Erik shook his head. "And if Sir Javier wants to be your perfect white knight so bad, why didn't he just tell the Director he'd do it alone?"

"He did! He *risked getting his kill switch set off!* He has a kind of strength you don't value, Erik. The kind of strength that doesn't come from hurting people. It comes from *helping* them."

If he had lost less blood, or gotten some sleep, Erik might have been able to handle these words better. As it was, they hit the tightening knot in his chest with exquisite force, he was momentarily speechless from pain.

Erik had no impulse to explain himself, to declare how much he'd risked. On the contrary, she must never know what he'd done. It was way too embarrassing now. He'd thought risking his life would prove he was worthy of her feelings. But those feelings were for someone else. Any tenderness rendered as payment could only demean both of them.

Erik had tried, his entire life, to earn the love he could not feel. But he realized now, nothing he could have done would've earned the love he'd wanted. Because real love could not be denied. No matter what.

Signal pulled in under a bank of flowering trees outside an old Ojai hotel, cut the engine, but didn't take the keys out of the ignition. She turned in her seat to face him, her voice urgent.

"Erik. I'm sorry. I don't want to fight with you, okay?"

He couldn't look at her. He didn't have enough control his face and he would not endure her pity on top of everything else.

"What you did back there was brilliant. You're brilliant. And I… I'm glad I know you, okay? I'm grateful to have you as my friend."

The worst of all possible words.

"So if we're all going to be free now, I hope…I hope you stay my friend."

Just friends meaning *leave me alone*.

"We won't be seeing each other again," Erik answered her flatly.

"…No?"

"Your mystery is solved. What else do we even have to talk about?"

"I'd talk to you about anything, Erik." And her cool fingers were around his hand, his hand that had done such terrible things. "I hope you know that."

"Cool, thanks." Erik leaned back against the headrest, already weary at what lay ahead. "But when all our kill switches go offline at once, I suspect our Director is going to get busy finding us. Keeping in touch would just help him do it faster."

He would hop a train north and kill Skye, then go farther north and get Ledrick. When Signal and Javier were done honeymooning, they could go officially clear her name with the evidence in Jaw's lock box. Happy endings, all around.

"So yeah, this is the last time we'll see each other," Erik told her.

Signal seemed to sway a little in her seat. He looked over at her just as she turned her head away, like they were back on the swings.

He would kill to be back on the swings.

"Heartbreaking, I know," Erik went on sarcastically. Then, a little louder than everything else: *"Seeing as we barely know each other anyway."*

She tried to pull her hand away then, but his terrible hand rebelled; it could not let this last good thing go. Worse, he brought her hand closer, so it hovered just short of the throbbing knot of pain in his chest.

The car went silent then. A silence so deep and tense he could hear the small white flowers from the tree above when they landed on the windshield, the brush of petal on glass, could feel her pulse in her palm. Because her hand was still holding his.

"At least we got to say goodbye this time," Erik said, and raised his eyes to hers.

Every line of Signal's face was a confession. Of longing, and hope, and the deepest, most heart-wrenching pain. It mirrored his, perfectly.

"I miss you," Signal told Erik, tears flashing down her face like falling stars. "I miss you every day."

"Are you CRYING?!" Erik choked. "Signal, I'm kidding. I'm just kidding!"

And then she started *really* sobbing—a breathless, ugly cry—and it

was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen, because he knew it wasn't a dream, this was happening. He was awake and she was looking at him like that.

"Signal! Signal!" He loved that he could make her cry, but it was immediately distressing. "Don't cry! It was just a joke! I'm kidding! You think you could lose me that easy?" Ledrick could live another day. Signal would have to chase him off with a rake now. It felt like dawn twice in one day, everything just now starting. "We still have to make sure your name gets cleared, okay? I was just giving you a hard time. I didn't think you'd CRY!" And then, unable to suppress his smile any longer, "*Why* are you crying, Signal?"

The furious look she gave him then made him burst out laughing.

Then she practically leapt across the console, her pitiful little hands twisting his collar as she cursed him. She was finally touching him, touching him greedily, the vanilla soap smell blooming all around him, and suddenly all he could see was her mouth.

Erik let himself touch her face then, reverently. Tilted her chin until her mouth was across from his. Her hand, that had never done anything wrong, reached for him. Her fingers sank into his hair. He looked into her eyes. The grief had cleared away, and her soul shone out.

With all the gentleness and control he possessed, Erik leaned in and kissed Signal.

This, Erik thought, *is better than climbing.*

No wonder she made him so hungry. Her mouth was better than candy. Her hands were in his hair, across his back, and everywhere they touched they fit. Everything that had hurt now glowed, each cell spinning with euphoria, his favorite song somehow booming through the car right at the best part. And when her tongue touched his, the knot in his chest came loose and all his forbidden feelings ran riot.

Erik caught himself just short of biting down. He pulled back and said exactly what he was thinking out loud:

"We aren't friends, Signal. Friends don't make each other *feel* like that."

The hurt and joy, the pain and ecstasy, they were irreplaceable

and real and his. And he wanted all of them because he wanted all of her.

Erik wanted the Girl from Hell, no matter what. Even if she ruined everything. Even if she destroyed his life. Even if she ripped his heart out.

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This book is truly for the fans. It will only spread if it is shared from one fan to the other. Please share it with someone you think would love it.

I am so grateful to those who have made space in their time, minds, and hearts for this story. *Teen Killers Club* has now ended for me, but for other people it is just beginning.